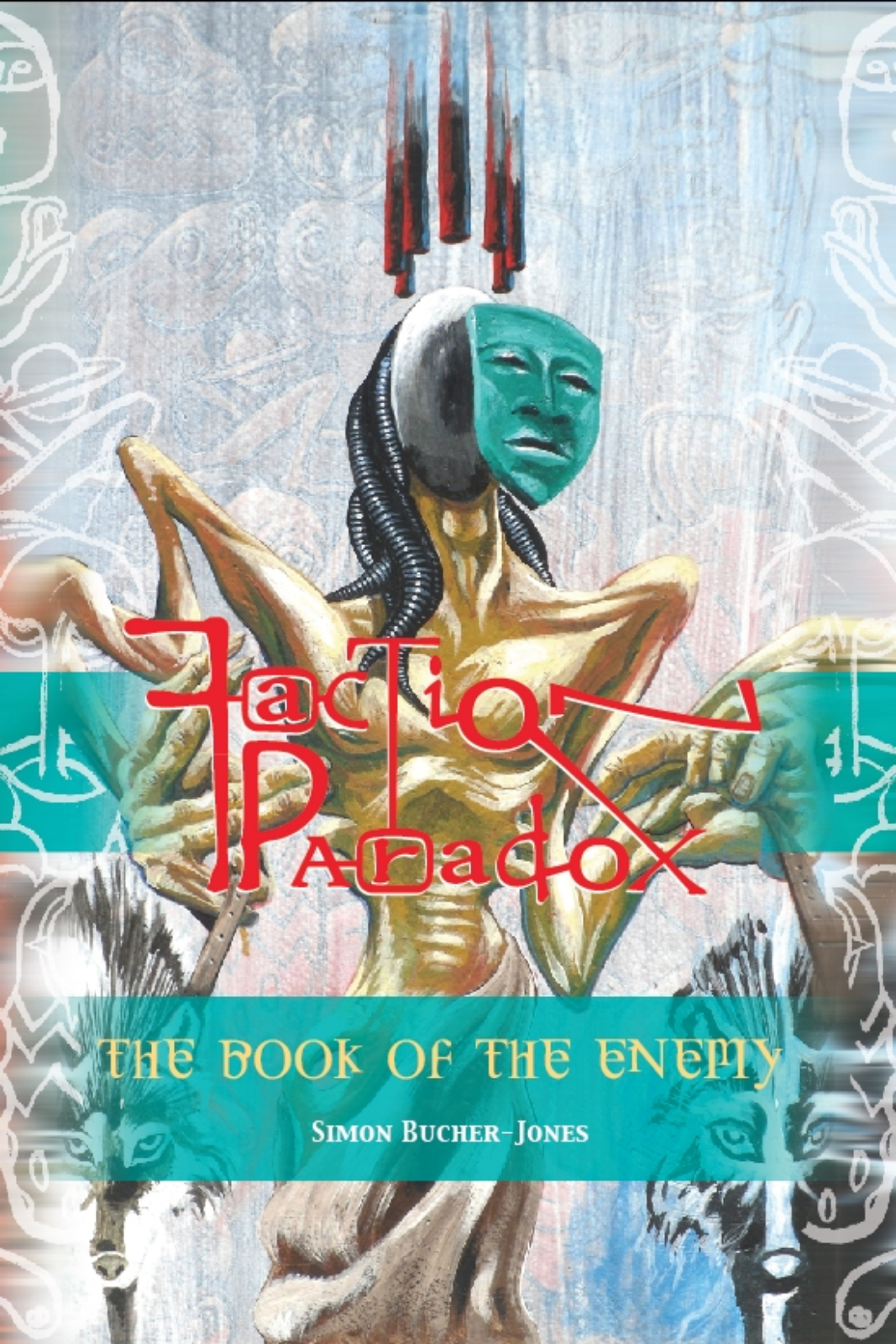
Tactical Paradox
THE BOOK OF THE ENEMY
SIMON BUCHER-JONES

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The Book of the Enemy

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Narratives by (in order of appearance)

- The Annotated Autopsy of Agent A by Simon Bucher-Jones
- Cobweb and Ivory by Nate Bumber
- The Book of the Enemy by Andrew Hickey
- T.memeticus: A Morphology by Philip Purser-Hallard
- The Short Briefing Sergeant's Tale by Simon Bucher-Jones
- A Bloody (And Public) Domaine by Jacob Black
- Life-Cycle by Grant Springford
- First Draft by Nick Wallace
- Eyes by Christian Read
- We are the Enemy by Lawrence Burton
- Timeshare by Helen Angove
- A Choice of Houses by Simon Bucher-Jones
- Houses of Cards by Lisa Sarah Good
- The Enemy – The Hole in Everything by Simon Bucher-Jones
- The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Enemy by Jay Eales
- No Enemy but Despair by Simon Bucher-Jones
- The Map and the Spider by Wilhelm Liebknech

Briefings by (in order of appearance)

- Time Strategist - Irma Ebbinghaus (Briefing A, D)
- The Oracle of Shakespeare (Briefing B)
- *Michael Simpson*[1] *(*Briefing C)
- Time Strategist – Entarodora (Briefing E, I)
- Captain Robert Scarratt Rtd Deceased (Briefing F,H)
- The Writer's Yearbook 2019 (Briefing G)
- Alain Chartier (Pseudonym) (Briefing J)
- Xenaria Who Survived (Briefing K)
- Marko Marz (Briefing L)
- Colonel Malachi Yarrow (Briefing M)
- The Book of Lies (Briefing N)
- The apocryphal infant gospel of Grandfather Paradox (Briefing O)

- Un-named Psychiatrist (Briefing P)
- *Lesley Drakken* (Briefing Q)
- Professor Gen Volst (Briefing R)
- Operative X-12 (Briefing S)

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1 Briefing sources italicised are ‘real’ members of lesser species existing contemporaneously with this active briefing.

Subjective Interlock Alpha

They tell me that there is a hole in my memory, but I think they may be lying.

I remember going to sleep, just normally, in my bed, in the cream bedroom in the smaller of my three houses – should I say smallest? Perhaps. I remember the language I'm speaking, I believe I can respond grammatically but I never know if it is right, or just what I remember as being right. If I was in error before, perhaps I repeat that error.

It was a small house. The little one my youngest brother built, in his quiet rustic style, the one I always visited reluctantly because his wife doesn't (didn't?) approve of me, and expressed it with certain gestures of her hands which are part of no formal sign language. She is speechless (the old, possibly vulgar, phrase, is dumb) a thing my youngest brother prefers in his women, claiming it to be restful. I doubt this because of the expressive disdain of those long hands, which must always be clattering cutlery in the tiny kitchen.

It would not have surprised me to find one day that she had murdered him.

Perhaps by now she has – he does not visit me here.

They are trying (I think) to fix my mind. There are screens around my bed, they shut me off from the ward in which my bed lies, and from the hospital of which presumably the ward is a part. On the inside of the screens – text and images are displayed. Sometimes parts of the screens become psychoactive, and I can interact with the facts – with the tales? – that they show me. I cannot tell which if any concern me directly. Perhaps they all do. Perhaps one is why I am here.

Subjective Injection Ends

Initial Briefing [Transcription method : Bullet Points]

• 'If paranoia teaches us anything, it's that you can't trust anyone who wants to teach you something. What, we should be asking, does paranoia get out of this?'

Time Strategist: Entarodora[1]

• 'Certain, neo-loomed Fifth Wave Agents were to aspects of the Enemy's *anderenseelenallein*[2] introduced – the narrative forms thus collected are offered as this metabriefing – at issue: how better could they have been prepared, the Enemy to experience? If differently taught, would their survival more assured have been?'

THE SCREENS

<**0**> Welcome to this interactive briefing worm: is what you have chosen to extend. It has already opened your eyes.

Eyes.Activate(Open).

What you see is what you get. Simply indicate by eye-movements your preferred acquisition pathways.

You are **NOT** paralysed. You are in **NO** danger.

Virtualised Briefing Units, MAY opt to experience PHYSICAL engine activation with Page™ and Finger™ print technologies [17th to 22st century entry points only].

Suggested Nodes of Data are as follows: MAKE YOUR CHOICE.

I'm sorry can you repeat that? Goto <0>

Where am I? I feel strange. Goto <1>

What has happened to my memory?Goto<2>

<**1**> You are recuperating from an **OMEGA** level event involving direct contact with The Enemy. Your debriefing will follow. At this time it has been necessary to <2>

<**2**> Until your experiences can be evaluated by the Command of your respective Great Houses and approved as suitable for briefing next wave troops, you are being held orthogonal to basal time. This can affect memory. You will relive/ are reliving the events that brought you here, for the RECORDING engines. Your RE:(actions) will be noted, your hindsight evaluated. You will live each other's memories as we prepare a synthesis of your biodata. You are in **NO** danger. The time of danger has passed for you. Be of Good Cheer.

Suggested individual memory tracks are as follows:

Goto Narratives by (in order of appearance).

MAKE YOUR CHOICE.

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1 Following the non-events of the Brakespeare Incident(s), Time Strategist Entarodora may be regarded as a level three risk. Her assessments must therefore be disregarded/especially noted [delete as applicable.]

2 Literally their all-alone-ness. Their uniqueness and singularity.

Pre-narrative Briefing A

[These buffers are presented for your safety between quasi-active-text experiences.]

The Enemy is not a certain world, nor is it a certain species. At one time a person may be of the Enemy's camp and at another neutral, or even allied with the Great Houses. To be of the Enemy is to have become **infected** with their rhetoric, to have adopted their methods, to strive towards their ends rather than our own. Ask always – who profits – is it us, or THEM? Is it those who create or those who consume? The Enemy are always in a minority, but their very inconsistency serves them for a shield. They wear the flesh of the commonality, they bow (seemingly) to their superiors, but they invest their every act with an irony which is symptomatic of their progressive disconnection from the world-machine. They are cogs which grit their teeth, and deny that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. They are immune to the certainty of history, and their most sinister belief is the assertion that *anything* might not only have been different, but that it might *still* be different tomorrow. By Enemy here, of course I speak only of the 'Rep' level; behind them, we know, stands (if standing is the correct anatomical metaphor) a different *kind* of entity, a different *experience* of what it means to be. It is by no means a false step (although it may be a step which is partially a circumambulation) to describe the Enemy by the German phrase: Weltschmerz. The one thing which the Enemy cannot abide is a Utopia. They are incapable of contentment, and this is their great weakness.

Irma Ebbinghaus

The Annotation Autopsy of Agent A.

'John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 37th[1] President of the United States of America, was taken to the morgue on the 19th January 1967. Aged 50, at the end of a second term. He was dead upon arrival.'

The End of the President: The Heart-Attack That Shook the West

Doctor Meredith Payne

I enter the medical room confidently. A standard form of time stasis has been imposed upon the local continua to enable me to have free access.

The stasis can only be held for around thirty minutes for logistical reasons: after that long, eddy variances will begin to build up along the splice lines and the pause will register over non-local distances to time scanners of types fourteen and above. We draw the danger point at that level purely practically for the sake of having a red line, there is no reason to suppose that the Enemy's peculiar interaction with time equates precisely to access to technologies equal to – or even – it is whispered – occasionally in excess of our own, but we must make *some* kind of tactical assessment. They do not use technology themselves, but their history **includes** it. They can infect and make use of those who use it. The histories they devour include tool-users and may 'at any moment' introduce time technologies, so inchoate and bizarre are their distortions. Still for the moment I am safe.

Our coverage of the Spiral Theatre is after all, practically complete. I have enacted these motions several times successfully in mock-time, and thirty minutes is well in excess of the amount of pseudo-time required for the investigation I need to make.

The Enemy life-spores are present as I feared they would be. Swimming in the President's dead cells. He was about one meal from birthing. This time we were lucky.

Did they really come from **outside** the Universe? At first it seemed not: they were merely another danger to time-bound, local space travelers in a narrow window of futurity (as judged against Great House basal time.) They infested a lost ship of an unfamiliar lesser species, they preyed on the human crew of the vessel *Narcissus*, when it chanced upon the wreck, infecting and transfiguring the crewman *James Watt*. So far so normal: but soon the logic of their presence began to bend and distort the Spiral Politic. Suddenly the asteroid the lost ship had been found on, no more originally than a desolate lump of rock, warped and bloated into a whole world – one which had drawn a human colony to itself, despite there being no conceivable reason for it being picked as a colony destination in that era. In a spell of time somehow equally retro-engineered (as we then thought) the colony was precisely time-vectored to be there and vulnerable at the nexus for a major upsurge of the spores in their 'first-creature' forms, and drawn back as the colony was drawn to that forbidding planet came the sole survivor of the ill-fated *Narcissus,* Captain Jennifer Alistoun. Surviving, only just, she would encounter the species again, and again – each time changed, as she changed. Then came the first deep time oddity – the real warning that this incursion would spread beyond a

limited series of time-bound adventures in one of the lesser species active periods. Another warlike species, at the top of its food/hunting chain – a species with no historical contact with humanity in our observations – entirely unallied to these events – suddenly began to reference the Enemy in its history. And so our time-sensor and observations of Deeper Time, began to unfold the danger to us. The Enemy *appeared* from nowhere in 'future-time' their history a mere vague implication, but when they achieved (the mathematics is still uncertain) a sufficient penetration of **that** sector of the Spiral Politic, they suddenly had ***always*** have been there earlier – a cuckoo-form inserting themselves into the supposedly ever-inviolate past of their next victim species. Soon that once proud race would exist only as a footnote to *their* presence. This they did without time machines or timeships, without science or culture. They did it as a biological infestation seemingly unlimited in space-time. Our best theory remains that they simply do not perceive time: they spore into other times because they do not **know** there are other times. Their biological motes drag history behind them like a dense rotating mass. They drill into the past.

Soon (by our linearity) they had traced the world line of the *Narcissus* back to the human world 'Earth' pulling the history of their entangled species with them. And then in places where they had never been, and in times they had no reason ever to have been – the Enemy began to breed and grow. They infected the first astronauts of the British Rocket Group, they budded in 1950s towns and 70s cityscapes, but those traces died out in time, ending in the occasionally possessed Mall, or shunned military bases. Once or twice they filled a valley with Mist and killed or drove mad all within, but they could not quite make the major jump in perception they needed. For that they would – we theorized, need to tap a huge pool of psychic energy, of belief, of hope.

This infestation was, we felt a crucial one.

While the spores were not yet developed enough to burst out as simple monsters, and certainly not potent enough in 1967 yet to use their anti-time characteristics – inserting themselves backwards into the meta-flow from here – they were dangerously present in an era flooded with iconic energies. Flourishing enough in *that* **now** we judged that they would be able once successful to force their way back as, literally, never before, beyond the 1950s. Into the Old-times: when they would be the colossi that strode the early universe. They would be the spawn seeded by Giants: spawning themselves into the biospheres of barely nascent worlds. Themselves mindless – they would 'create' Creators and Agents as part of their 'false history' of alternative-facts. Without conscious daring, they would 'dare' to try to usurp our roles. And they would be worse Gods than we

ever tried to be. The projections proved that. The further back their pseudo-history was pushed, the more distorted and nonsensical – the more illogical and meaningless it would become. Their 'Neverhavebeen' originators with their bio-engineering bent would foster their chimeric offspring: until they too, triggering eventually the anti-time capacities buried deep in their first genetic codes, would fold back *again* upon their creators. A Ragnarok folded into an Ouroborus: the end eating the beginning of the Gods and round and round rolling its destroying hoop across all the fields of lower time. Nor can we be certain the loop would hold.

Something might escape it. Something that had eaten up the 'Gods'. Or else it would just end with mindless eating spread out across time, with only the thinnest veneer of transparent justification remaining at the very start of history. In the beginning the Gods made Monsters (in the end the Monsters made the Gods).

To prevent this, this timeline would **now** need to be disinfected back to the point at which they penetrated the President, not because he was himself of more than minor importance to THE PRESENT SCHEMATIC but because embedded at such a point of power their effects would have been magnified.

The iconography of this specific time: Camelot – the shining city of the hill – the President who chose to do things not because they were easy but because they were hard, who had committed his people to reach the moon by the end of the decade and Mars by the end of the century, played to them. It was a rising spike of psychic energy in the mindscape – and such an inrush of devotion, of fealty, of – let us not be coy about it – love, swirls in them and gives them strength.

I leave knowing what I need to do. The sixties have to die. It's them or us. The hippies have to end in the napalm fields of a different culture's sacrifice. The President cannot live to see his victories. The burning flares of the seventies have to roll in. It will be a long sacrificial campaign.

Pre-narrative Briefing B

You have chosen to CONSULT THE ORACLE OF SHAKESPEARE – embodied by the fiction engines of the Literaturges. All who transcribe, are part of that iconic history, all those who speak of horses, all those who dream the dreams by which the Enemy can be dissected. Things can be discussed by art that cannot be shown directly.

God can be regarded as a high level fiction, applied to the interface of consciousness and the external world: it simplifies the world-picture that needs to be maintained by abstracting the majority of external PHYSICAL events as being essentially inscrutable, ineffable and unquestioned. Things act as they do because of an unseen mind. Things act as they do for the best.

Step back from the edge now, as the wind sweeps up and around you. It's too uncertain here. Yes, the mountains are beautiful, if they are mountains – and not the broken stumps of shattered space-elevator systems and the giant ankles of fallen statues.

It's still a moment to savour that our neurology registers beauty. It won't be long before someone in the Great Houses concludes that the complex parts of the brain necessary to appreciate form and colour are surplus to the requirements of the War. Then everything will be black and white, or at best faded orange and blue, and the surfaces of the world will smooth into plastic identiformations, until neuro-briefing and life are indistinguishable.

When that happens the days of the Great Captains will be over, and no one will talk of Scarratt, of Karllemaine, of Madam Patronellia the Fivefold, of Xenaria Who Survived. Their citadels will be taken apart and packed back into basal space, and be no more than footlocker tesseracts from which the toys of war are deployed in patterns set elsewhere. There will be no free ships, and no free warriors. The Enemy and the Great Houses will reach the accommodation foreshadowed by the Utterlost Accords.

The Hot Peace: the War a set of orchestrations, a mathematics in space-time: that cannot be resolved, it can only be re-summed.

'Like two strong swimmers that do cling together and choke their art?'

That's right.

Now you are ready.

Cobweb and Ivory

And it came to pass that Avus, who then comprehended his destiny not, stepped through the alter-time doorway; and it appeared unto him that he stood on nothing, for his path was but a strand of silk, and on either side was the void: and the path led to the city of cobweb and ivory, whose shining towers reached to the darkness. He beheld the city, and set forth.

The first palace stood on the outskirts of the city: and lo, the mammoth doors were shut firmly to even his transcendent lock-pick; and the five next palaces were locked alike. The silk path spread into a great woven street; and a great park, its trees of onyx stone standing above vats of dark water: and lo, the seventh palace opened unto him, and Avus endeavoured within.

Inside stood an army of twenty score warriors, all facing forward, their faces staring silently ahead. Avus walked among them; but he was calm, for he had studied many alter-time realms, but from none had life risen; and these men were made of stone painted with bright colours. How long had these silent warriors waited? Had ‘how long’ a meaning in this place? But when Avus turned about, lo, one of the warriors had moved its blank face to gaze upon him; and surely, as he looked around, the necks of all these men had twisted towards him: and Avus fled the hall, shutting the door and locking it fast with the transcendent pick. He saw not the other opening, and he saw not the warriors moving into the park.

Avus ran with fear into the next palace. Inside was a great many breeding-engines, like those of the Great Houses. But these engines whispered not; they were cold and dead, and the unformed flesh within smelled not of tangy celestial potential but of the dour odour of the lesser species: and indeed, in the tank lay the shape of a human child, its face unmoulded, and its body unbuilt, and its history unformed.

But behold: a painted warrior stood outside the window at the back of the great room; and Avus held still and watched it, but it moved not. Avus spake unto the warrior, ‘I have no weapon, and thou hast not a reason to attack me.’ Yet it gave no reply, and it moved not: but Avus, upon glancing back at the front door, saw it moved only when his eyes were turned. And thus he left the palace, with his eyes still on the painted warrior.

At the end of the avenue was a great temple, its walls woven into the cobweb of the street; and he went towards it through the park. But as he passed by the pool under the onyx trees, he looked into the dark water. Avus knew each proton in its arc, and each electron in its orbit: but behold, the fluid within was like none in Heaven or its Spiral. And as he looked up from the pool, a painted warrior stood before him, with a hand stretched out; and Avus stumbled in fright and fell backwards into the pool, the strange drug seeping into the pores in his skin like

water filling a sponge plucked by a diver from the sea floor.

Despite their unusual appearance, sponges are actually animals, with about ten thousand different species known today. However, most types are hard to the touch – not very good for cleaning! The specific species seen here, most often known as the 'bath sponge', is usually only found by coastal areas in the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and the West Indies. But today, our diver isn't interested in harvesting cleaning supplies: half buried in the sand is the large skeleton of –'

'– the hacker group Anonymous, who claimed credit for the attacks in a video posted online earlier today. Disguised as always by a voice filter and a 'Faction Paradox' skull mask, their representative threatened that the group would release-'

Abigail sighed and clicked the television off, leaning back and propping her feet up on the table. The sudden movement startled Avus, who fluttered out of the way and perched on the lamp stand to survey the small living room. 'What … is this?' he whispered, his throat box distorting the words into a nonsensical twitter.

'Aww, did I startle you?' Abigail said with a chuckle. 'Come on, let's get you your dinner.' She stood and walked into the kitchen, knocking twice on the grey granite countertop. But as she passed the window, a painted warrior appeared in the yard, staring in at Avus through the glass. Avus stared right back. There was no time for existential crisis; Abigail would walk past again soon, and the line of sight would be broken, and the warrior would move closer. He needed a better vantage point.

Avus waddled across the arm of the lampstand, carefully maintaining his focus on the warrior through the window. Thank goodness birds didn't blink. (Why am I a bird?) Abigail's heavy footsteps started coming closer, and he waddled faster. (How do I know her name?) There: if she just stayed close to the wall, he'd still be able to see.

Abigail came around the corner and walked away from the wall. 'You must be so hun–'

She disappeared with a thunderclap. Right behind where she'd just been standing, the painted warrior stared at Avus, one hand outstretched into a pointing gesture. Avus, eyes still frozen, began to nervously waddle in the other direction. (How did I get up here? There's no… oh.) His wings unfurled and he took to flight. But with his eyes locked on the statue, he was as blind as a pilot steering a warship through a dense nebula. The control panel blinked at him with unfamiliar lights below a view-screen flooded with fluorescent gas. Avus watched as the gas shifted to reveal a small blue world, speckled with green and white landmasses, nestled within its bright cluster. His inherent connection to the heart

of the Spiral Politic was still faintly tugging at the back of his mind; the dark drug was inspiring a hallucination more vivid than anything the Houses could induce. He was billions of years and miles away from Abigail's sitting room and a time realm distant from the ivory city, but he was still too close to the painted warrior.

Avus looked outwards. Behind the planet, strange shapes were gliding through the swirling nebula like a primitive priestess' hands waving through the smoke of a glittering campfire in an endless field of snow. He briefly considered joining the circle of humans around the warm fire, but he chose to stay back in the cold.

As the priestess eased the bone mask over her head, her back slouched into a predatory curl and her neck bent into an unnatural-looking twist. Avus watched from just outside the circle as she began to speak. Her mask seemed familiar, and it bothered him that he could not place it; he knew her name was Aguta.

'In the time before time,' she began, 'in this land was a great jungle with animals of all kinds and trees that touched the skies. Its air was warm and wet, but all around was snow, and on the snow were the huts of a band of six families. Each new moon, they chose their wisest to lead them, and it was always Petuja. She showed them how to live alongside the jungle and honour the spirits within each animal and plant. But when she passed to the spirits, the families chose young Yuka to lead them. He said they should abandon their huts and make a place for themselves in the heat of the jungle. So he led the families out of the snow, and they set the trees aflame to clear a place; but their fire spread beyond their control, and the jungle and its animals were destroyed. The families returned to their huts in the snow, and they said, 'Look, it is better that the jungle is gone; now all the land is alike: flat, clean, cold'. But while they talked, the spirits of the animals and the plants went to the north, and the last great behemoths came down to destroy the huts in the night.'

'What happened to the families?' asked a child in his mother's lap.

Aguta peered down at the little boy through the holes in her mask. 'They were left naked in the cold, and they grew grotesque, woolly faces. In their hunger they began to hunt one another, and their skin grew too strong to be cut by stone or horn. When our ancestors came to this land, they drove them away with the help of the spirits, but they still roam the dark places, seeking their revenge.'

The child shivered; the campfire had died down, and the plain was now lit only by the glowing coals and the cold stars. 'And the behemoths?' he asked.

Before the priestess could answer, a flurry passed through the circle and began to swirl above the firepit, and there in the wind appeared the painted warrior. Its dead eyes stared straight at Avus through the darkness. Avus fixed his eyes on the

warrior and focused on the feel of the cold wind on his arms, the chill breeze of the high atmosphere above a dense forest canopy shaded with strange colours by a fluorescent nebula above. The transparent platform on which Avus stood was as long and as wide as he could see, but his view was obstructed by the mass of bodies crammed around him. These, he saw, were dignitaries of every posthuman civilisation from the Milky Way's last humanoid Arcadians to the miniscule librarians of the Plume Coteries in the distant reaches of dead space. Towering high above the swirling crowd was a woven pillar holding a podium and a covered box. Was this an exhibition? An auction? An art gallery? If so, why were there warships lurking in the atmosphere above?

These questions were immediately forgotten when he spotted the painted warrior in the crowd. Rationally, the warrior was just a subconscious side effect of the hallucination, and it would not hurt him if it touched him; however, that was a hypothesis Avus was not interested in testing. It was useless to try to maintain a line of sight in the shifting crowd, so he started moving in the opposite direction, shoving past countless ambassadors and, painfully, a cactus-skinned child, until the warrior was nowhere to be seen.

A speaker appeared at the podium, and the crowd quieted. Though he had never seen her before, Avus recognised the speaker as the woman called Linemica. 'Welcome to Terra Primagenia,' she began. 'This is no New Earth like any we have known. For it is made not for us, not for the new, but for the old.' She paused as if in anticipation of an appreciative whisper from the audience. They remained silent.

A paper-thin posthuman slipped past Avus into the crowd, moving closer to the podium and revealing the painted warrior less than an arm's length away. Avus' instinct was to move away, but with this proximity, an uninterrupted line of sight was more important. However, the warrior was looking at Linemica, not Avus. A meaty hand on Avus' shoulder drew him back as a gigantic posthuman dignitary passed between him and the warrior.

'Today, I return to our universe the potential for dreams to come true,' Linemica continued. 'With the most delicate craftsmanship, with the most generous donors …'

'With the most illegal time travel,' whispered the passing dignitary, elaborately rolling her fifteen hundred eyes in a vast sweeping motion like a wave … a wave. Is the drug wearing off? Why can't I escape?

'… we have finally made incarnate that of which our ancestors dreamt for billions of years.'

The dignitary moved out of the way, and the painted warrior was gone.

‘Long in the collective memory of our kind have lurked the great woollen beasts of the north, with their shaggy fur and their gleaming tusks. And now they have become more than memory.’

There the warrior was: fifty paces away – then seventy – moving more distant with every instant it was out of sight. A hasty retreat.

‘I present to you … the great tusked god Cernunnos!’ And the covering unfolded itself to reveal a woolly mammoth. Avus focused on it; despite the distance, its sunken eyes glimmered with a dark magic, and though its mouth did not move, words boomed out over the platform. ‘On my command, your ancestors hunted us to extinction.’ Something was off about the way it spoke, and Avus focused in on the quality the voice took as it travelled through the air. ‘Now you have resurrected me, I shall return to you the true form of the universe.’ But there was no quality to the speech; the words were not affected by the wind or the distance. They were not in the air; they were in his mind.

This is wrong. Avus squinted at the mammoth: its polished tusks, carefully sharpened to a point like a spear; or its hair, trimmed and shaved into irregular spirals like a collapsing galaxy; or the heavy chains of silver and gold, drooping off its tusks like the cascading mercury falls of the Amazolian system, where, yes, where the eight-legged meerwolves hunt for mineral-rich rocks. From a cliff Avus watched as a pack below devoured a dissolving boulder, and he wondered how, now free of the warrior, he could get back to the Homeworld. He could choose to change the vision, but that power was sporadic at best, and there was no control over what it would change into; more worryingly, his real body was still in the alter-time realm, lying at the bottom of the pool or, worse, at the mercy of the painted warriors.

A mighty screech escaped from one of the meerwolves down below, and the pack scattered into the woods, abandoning their half-finished meal. Indeed, there was a great crashing noise amid the trees, and out of them came a mammoth with piercing eyes and sharpened tusks: and Avus fell, down through the air onto the floor of the temple. Smoke sat heavy in the air, and he coughed instinctively; and dark spittle dripped from his chin in long lines, for his body was paralysed, and his skin and clothes were dripping from the strange pool. Before him in the shadow stood a great throne of gold and ivory.

‘Be not afraid,’ spake Cernunnos. ‘Thou hast shown us the way, Avus; the crimes of thy fathers are undone through thee.’ Its voice shimmered through the psychic dimension, like light through the smoke of the room; and Avus knew not what he meant, and he would know not for centuries yet. ‘What art thou?’ he imagined himself saying; and though no air left his lungs, the beast gave reply.

‘I am ruler of the mammoths and divinity of the first men of stone and flesh.’ And the painted warriors came forth in the shadow; and they lifted the dark water to Avus’ immobile lips. ‘I am the future, and with me I bring back the history thy people forsook.’

And though his lips were closed, and his lung reserves were filled with air, Avus could feel the fumes entering into him; and he thought to himself, the visions were under the control of the mammoth, as long as the psychic link was maintained. And behold, he focused his mind on the link, and he found the weakest section, and he lashed out like the shadow of a falling guillotine in the streets of a purgatorial city. Avus stood and watched the execution, but there was Cernunnos, rearing up over him; and he scrambled backwards, the dirty street tearing at his hands. Cernunnos’ tusks glistened in the sunlight with the shine of the painted warriors dancing in the flickering light, and Avus parted his lips to breathe deeply of the dark water: and its odour was the earthy smell of a freshly tilled – no, the earthy smell of animal dung collected and sold as fertiliser by a bestiary in the centre of a busy city.

There in the bestiary, Avus stood and watched a mammoth trapped in a cage. Its tusks were dull, and its hair was disheveled, but its eyes burned with a familiar rage. A girl named Lucita walked up to Avus. ‘How are you today, sir?’ she asked him, and he nodded. He could feel the mammoth trying to speak into his mind, but it could not. Instead, it released a titanic bellow that made the earth rumble and echo like the shaking of a Homeworld breeding-engine in its cradle, and Avus fell out of the shed, where he knew well the mammoth could not follow. An elder focused his fierce eye at Avus and said, ‘Causing trouble again?’

But Cernunnos sat again on the throne in the temple; and it spake unto Linemica, ‘He has inspired us, and we have inspired him. He shall forget his visions not. Surely one Homeworld shall be brought down by his will. But in the meanwhile, we must begin to plan.’ And plan they did.

Pre-narrative Briefing C

[Meta. Lesser Species Source]

First of all, don’t take this as the only interpretation, if only because the Enemy would lose their power otherwise. Second of all, this is going to take some

explaining. To do it, I'm going to need to talk about the Great Houses, and basal human history.

Have you heard of the Whigs? They were a political faction in British politics: originating roughly around the English Civil War and having a massive influence on political and cultural attitudes even today with the original faction having long since fallen apart and splintered and evolved away from their origins. The important bit here is this: they believed in a specific notion of progress and history, whereby history is an inevitable progression towards a kind of enlightenment which looks oddly like sharing the precise beliefs of a Whig historian.

I am talking about this, because the Great Houses before a certain political assassination (and, more to the point, as shown in briefing document, *The Book of The War*) are essentially Whig historians that can force their own perspective of history into being actual reality. Hell, the Great Houses designed history that way: an inevitable progression which they are conveniently the pinnacle of.

The Faction are a challenge to this: a champion for the 'secret histories' of the world that can challenge the meta-narrative of the Great Houses. They're often compared to Haitian Voodun for a reason: at a time when the Whigs of the world talked about the liberation of man and the necessity of slavery, in the same breath the Haitian revolution was the first successful slave revolt in history. The Whigs were outdone on every level by people they would have kept in chains, and in light of this the political experiments they were engaged in (the British Empire and the American Revolution) pretty much look like they were never going to amount to anything.

This is more or less what the Faction are trying to do for the Great Houses, and indeed its implied in the two or three documents that have reached us as further future anomalies that the Faction are actually weaker than they were during the War. Secret histories are like that: all history is basically a version of the past people choose to remember, and secret histories are only remembered effectively if there is a grand narrative to subvert. Were the USA to collapse and not take the world with it, the Haitian revolution (and in particular the American/European reactions to it) would probably be treated as a foreshadowing of the American experiment going nowhere but would be considered as irrelevant to the history a new empire would choose to create. In the same way, without the Great Houses to subvert, the Faction are actually greatly weakened.

Where does the Enemy fit into all of this? Well, remember when I described history as a version of the past that people choose to remember? The Enemy are simply the facts of reality reasserting themselves in the face of the interpretations

imposed upon it: they are the fact that history has no arc, no morals, and no ethics. They are the fact that the Great Houses are not the centre of the universe any more than Rome was the centre of the world when it had an Empire. The Enemy is the environmental limits of time and the universe asserting themselves.

The Great Houses, in their intellectual sterility, can only interpret this as an intelligence and an enemy and its impact as an attack, which on the one hand means that they can fight back but on the other means that they are eventually going to lose by the very nature of interpreting this as something that can be won or lost. Meanwhile, the various other things considered the Enemy: Mal'akh hoping for a little pay back, the end point summoned into the City of the Saved, mutineers from what was once the 6th wave, a timeship hoping to force changes upon her own society, xenophobic mutants travelling in their own personal war machines; all of these are merely powers that are trying to take advantage of this fact for their own ends.

An empire reaching its limits is, after all, why they tend to collapse. For all people like to blame the barbarian invasions for the collapse of the Roman Empire, there is more to it than that. Between the fact that it was funding itself through conquest only to run into natural barriers like the Sahara desert that very much prevented that and the fact that the cash crop monoculture the Roman empire was engaged in leached the nutrients from the soil and basically scuppered another supply of food and money, there is plenty of evidence that the Roman empire was falling apart already from environmental and economic factors.

For all the Faction puts in a good show about rebellion, what really brings an Empire to its knees is the fact that reality doesn't care about its achievements, that reality could roll over in its sleep and squash the empire like a bug and in the long run, it will.

Hmmm.

I think I just made an argument for backing the Enemy.

Michael Simpson.

The Book of the Enemy

1) The Club

The tale I have to tell you begins in the long winter of 19_, when I was, if not a young man, certainly a younger man than the one you see before you today. My hair had begun to thin, and my once-athletic frame had taken on that rotundity

which in later years turns to mere sagginess, but I was then still able to walk without a stick, and to fool myself into thinking I still possessed some modicum of physical attractiveness for the opposite sex (though I was not such a fool as ever to put this hypothesis to the test, as I should surely have been disillusioned in that regard).

At the time of which we are speaking, I was a member of a gentlemen's club. In these days of advanced views, gentlemen's clubs have all but disappeared – as, indeed, have gentlemen – but at this time they were, if not thriving enterprises, at least still in existence, their genteel decline mostly notable in the increasing age of their membership.

A gentlemen's club, for those of you fortunate enough to have been born into this new world of technology and equality, was a privately-owned large building to which a gentleman could retreat when the company of the female sex began to lose its charm. There, surrounded by other gentlemen of a similar background and disposition, he could get a square meal, a decent brandy, and as much or little good conversation as he desired.

Many club members, indeed, made no conversation at all – they would repair to their club to make use of its facilities, read the club's copies of the latest newspapers and periodicals, and doze in their chairs by the fireside. A great many clubs even specifically catered for the solitary gentleman, allowing him to go undisturbed about his business while still in the presence, if not the company, of others.

My own club was not one of that sort, though nor was it one of those which created a sense of camaraderie with a devotion to organised recreation. At this particular club, it was possible for a chap to have a game of cards or billiards should he wish to do so, but there was also a library which was even more well-stocked than its wine cellar, and one could often find the less voluble of the members reading one of these books in silence.

I should take a minute, perhaps, to discuss these books, as they are to figure in the tale I am about to tell. The club library was a room which must have been a hundred feet square, at least, and surrounded on all sides by floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

Each of these bookcases was filled with books, bound to a uniform size and standard. All were bound in black leather, with the title of the book printed in gold leaf on the spine, and with no other identifying feature. The pages inside the books, however, varied far more. Some were clearly from expensive private editions, others from penny-dreadful magazines, Penguin paperbacks, and other cheap sources of entertainment.

And the contents of the library were as varied as the sources from which it was taken. *Don Quixote* and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were there, along with Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, but so were cheap boys' adventure serials, Gothic novels, a complete set of the Sherlock Holmes books, and the complete works of Shakespeare.

There seemed to be no organising principle by which these works were shelved, and no principle by which they had been chosen either, except that all the books appeared to contain at least something of the fantastical about them.

This may have appeared odd to the casual observer, had casual observers been wont to attend the club, as the membership of the club did not stretch to the kind of man one expects to enjoy tales of the fantastic. Indeed, the membership was entirely made up of men like myself – men in the professions, and in the older years of their lives. Yet it is indeed the case that such men may, as their mortality becomes ever more apparent to them, become if anything more appreciative of the fantastical and wondrous in literature, as if seeking something which has been lost from their own lives and which can only be regained by vicarious means.

For myself, I was something of an *aficionado* of these books, but my own delight was in the tall tale. It was a regular custom of the members of the club, on the first Thursday of every month, to gather round the fireplace as a member would regale us all with a story which purported to be of his own adventures, but which would inevitably turn out to bear as much relation to the truth as the tales of Baron Munchausen. Each of us would take our turn in telling such tales, one each month, and it was my custom always to attend on those days, even had I no opportunity to visit the club the rest of the month.

On the occasion I wish to talk about today, it was the turn of the club's oldest member to tell the story, and I was moderately surprised to see him arise from his armchair and stand in front of us. While for the rest of the month he was usually the most gregarious of fellows, regaling us with endless stories of his golfing days, he had never previously appeared on the Thursday on which it was his turn to speak. It had long been assumed by the club's other members that he disapproved of the fantastical and the absurd, possibly being of that hidebound frame of mind which insists on plausibility above all else in its fiction.

Yet on this particular Thursday of which I intend to speak, our oldest member seemed almost to bound to his feet to tell us his story, though few of us had ever seen him stand for longer than it took to walk from the club's door to his favourite armchair.

As we had been waiting for the members to gather, I had been examining, but had not yet opened, an old leather-bound volume, which I had pulled from the

bookcase earlier, and the oldest member had remarked on it, and mentioned that it had been a favourite of his when he was younger. ‘I haven’t seen that book in more years than I should like to remember,’ he told me, ‘and tonight I may have to tell its story.’

I had no idea what he meant by that, so I was eager to hear his tale.

‘My friends,’ he began, ‘you may be surprised to see me here today. I have, in the past, made a habit of avoiding these storytelling affairs, and at the age of nearly a hundred years old you may suspect that any habits I have will be firmly set indeed. And, indeed, I do not expect ever to tell a story in this company again. You see, I have had some unfortunate news from my doctor, and expect my remaining lifespan to be measurable in days at the most.’

At the murmur of sympathy from the gathered members – though not of surprise, for he was, as he said, nearing his hundredth birthday, and one does not expect people of such an advanced age to be in perfect health – he waved his hand irritably.

‘Yes, yes, let’s take that as read, shall we? When one is nearing death, time seems a lot less wasteable than it does to youngsters such as yourselves,’ – a comment which few others should have made, since I was by far the youngest man in the room, and I was in my forties at the time – ‘and I should really like to tell my story.’

‘My story begins,’ he continued, ‘in the early parts of this century, and involves a man whom many of you will believe to be fictional – my good friend Sherlock Holmes.’

2) The Tale of the Oldest Member

Mr Holmes was in those days in the twilight of his career – he had started before I was even born, and I am not, as you are aware, a young man. He had rather acrimoniously parted company with his former companion Watson, and he was failing in his physical abilities, even though his mental powers were as strong as ever. As a young man I admired him as much as, perhaps, any man has admired another. His exploits were of course legendary even then, though nowhere near as exaggerated in the retelling as they have become since, but it was not for his adventures I enjoyed his company.

Indeed, Watson’s stories of him do, as Holmes himself complained, rather misrepresent his work. Not in the facts they present, which are, despite Holmes’ complaints, scrupulously correct, but rather in their selection. Watson, for obvious reasons, only chose to write about those stories which involved a modicum of adventure, but those events were rare indeed. For every excursion across the

moors or wrestling match on a precipice, there were a hundred times when Holmes was no more active than his brother Mycroft, merely sitting back, listening to a problem, and proposing a solution.

And it was that, more than anything else, which he loved. While he had cultivated his observational powers in his youth, by the time of which I am speaking his eyes were failing and he was no longer able to recognise a gentleman's place of residence by the presence of a particular species of mud on his trouser leg, or even to tell one brand of cigar ash from another. Yet he was still able to hear that discordant note in the music of the world – that one telling detail that can say 'something is wrong here – the story you are being told could not possibly have happened the way it is being recounted.' He could hear a description of a seemingly innocuous event and, much like a magician watching another's card trick, instantly seize on a detail. He might ask what a hotel guest had for breakfast, and on being told 'kippers' immediately know not only who committed a murder but that the forename of the man who served the kippers was Reginald. His deductive powers were even better than you have been informed – he was near supernatural in his abilities.

But on the day of which we are speaking, he seemed far from the sharp-minded man I knew. Indeed, he appeared preoccupied, and it took some time before I could persuade him to explain what was troubling him.

'Tom,' he said to me (for that is my name, though I no longer use my forename), 'I have a question for which I request – no, for which I *demand* – an honest answer. Will you give me one?'

'Sherlock, you know me well enough to know that I will do anything you ask of me, without reservation. What's the question?'

'Am I losing my faculties? Am I becoming senile?'

I laughed. God help me, I laughed.

'My old friend, what brought this on? Why, only yesterday you solved the case of the duplicate harp string without even opening your eyes! Your brain is still second to none! If you're senile, then the rest of the world is completely daffy!'

He did not look reassured. He thought for a moment before replying. 'That is what I feared.'

'You feared that you were *not* senile? What on Earth do you mean?'

'My dear…' he paused for a second. 'My dear fellow, where do I start with this? How do I explain it best? Let me see…what do you know of the land of Ruritania?'

I thought for a second. 'That's the place in *The Prisoner of Zenda*, isn't it?'

He nodded.

‘Well, I know it was in that book…and wasn’t there an ocean liner named after it? But other than that…look – why are you asking me about a fictional place?’

‘Because it is not fictional.’

‘Come again?’

‘Ruritania is – or should I say *was* – a very real place. I visited it on numerous occasions, with John. I was pleased to be of some small service to His Majesty King Rudolf on more than one occasion, and indeed was honoured by him with a Duchy – purely ceremonial, of course.’

‘But, come on, Holmes, you know that’s not true! Why, Ruritania is positively a byword for fictional places!’

‘It is now, yes. I became aware of that fact rather suddenly yesterday, when in conversation with a potential client, who informed me of this, in great and exhausting detail. I’m afraid he mocked me rather severely for my confusion. This is why I determined to ask your opinion of my current mental state.’

I was suddenly much more sober than previously I had been. I could not – *could not* – believe that the Holmes I had known for so many years, a man whose understanding of human nature was second only to his analytical rigour, could have so swiftly lost his faculties altogether. Yet nor could I believe what he was asking me to, that he had visited a land which exists on no maps.

‘My friend,’ I said to him, concerned, ‘is this some sort of prank you’re playing on me, like your occasional disguises? If so, I can only say that this is more worrying than humorous, and I for one will not appreciate the joke.’

‘No, no, there’s no joke here. If only there were. I have begun to think that… but no. That is much too far-fetched.’

I sat back in my chair and looked carefully at Holmes. I knew those features as well as I knew my own – if not even better, as I had undoubtedly spent more time gazing at that aquiline nose and high forehead than I had ever spent in contemplation of my own less aesthetically-pleasing profile in a mirror.

‘Tell me, Holmes,’ I implored. ‘Whatever you are thinking, let me know. Did you not yourself once say ‘when one has eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be true?’’

‘I did not. That was one of Watson’s embellishments, although the sentiment itself remains true. However…’

‘What?’

‘The suspicion I have, should it prove correct, is one that is indeed utterly impossible. And yet I find myself quite unable to eliminate it. We shall have to investigate this together, my dear friend, and we shall have to do so in a manner quite unlike any of my previous investigations.’

I did not wish to press him more on the subject at that point, and he seemed not to wish to discuss it, so the conversation moved on to other things, and while it troubled me for some days, I forgot it in time. My own affairs led me to spend some time abroad, and I rather fell out of touch with my friend for a few months, so much so that I was surprised when on my return to London some months later, I received a wire within an hour of my arrival.

'SUSPICIONS CONFIRMED STOP VISIT BRITISH MUSEUM STOP ASK TO SEE DARK ARCHIVES STOP GIVE PASSWORD DELTA ALPHA GAMMA TWO THREE FIVE STOP OBTAIN BOOK TITLED THE BOOK OF THE ENEMY STOP USE ANY METHODS NECESSARY TO REMOVE BOOK FROM LIBRARY AND PROCEED TO BAKER ST STOP SHERLOCK'

I was, to say the least, perturbed. I had performed many tasks for my old friend over the years, and many of them had been bizarre or outright grotesque. But this was possibly the first time he had asked me to commit such a publicly criminal act as to steal a rare book from our finest institution of higher learning. To receive such a request inclined me to reconsider my opinion of my old friend's sanity.

But I did, nonetheless, acquiesce to this strange demand, and made my way to the library of the British Museum, where I had held a membership for some years. I had not, however, ever heard of these so-called 'dark archives', and was sceptical of their existence. I wondered again to what extent my friend's behaviour might be motivated by the deteriorations of age.

But whatever his motives might have been, he was still Sherlock Holmes, and still deserved my respect and obedience. So to the British Museum I journeyed. I ventured into the Select Manuscript Room, filled in a ticket for the book in question, and used the password my friend had given me in place of a catalogue number. This seemed to satisfy the assistant.

As I waited in the reading room, I noticed another gentleman, sat at his table, turn suddenly as if in response to a noise only he could hear. His papers spilled to the floor, and he collected them with the help of a stout, clean-shaven, man who had been sitting nearby and who left soon after. I don't know why of all things that detail sticks in my mind, but for some reason it does.

The other thing that sticks in my mind, of course, is that the book was not there. The assistant, who had been the height of impersonal politeness when I approached him for the book, came back from his searches looking distressed.

'I cannot apologise enough, sir,' he said, his voice almost breaking with the strain, 'but the book is not there. I have no idea how this came to be…'

‘Don’t worry about it,’ I told him. ‘I am not entirely surprised. Thank you for your efforts.’

And in truth, somehow I was not surprised – whatever my old friend had wanted the book for, it was apparent that someone or someones else had also wished to obtain it.

Yet I was successful in my quest nonetheless, for I found that as I returned to the table at which I had been working, I passed the table at which the clean-shaven man had been sitting, and saw on that table the very article which I had been enjoined to purloin – a small book entitled *The Book of the Enemy*. I quickly added it to my satchel, and departed soon thereafter, determined that I should ask Sherlock about the book at the earliest opportunity.

But in order to do that, I should have to track him down. I made my way to his rooms at Baker Street, but despite the telegram I was under no illusions that he would actually be there. His residence had become entirely too well-known, thanks to Watson’s reports of his cases, and so Holmes was rarely present any more. The fact that he’d mentioned the residence in the telegram merely meant that he would have left me some sort of further instruction there – in the past I had often found gramophone cylinders or cryptograms. Once I had even been presented only with a set of muddy footprints, and when I had finally tracked him down he had been rather disappointed that I had not been able to obtain his location merely from the colour of the mud.

This time, at least, my task was a simple one. Holmes had left me a note, giving an address in Belgravia and saying ‘Whatever you do, do not read the book you have in your hands, if indeed you have it. You may of course have been unsuccessful in your attempt to obtain it before our adversary. If so, that is almost a blessing. Whatever the result, please attend without delay, my dear Watson.’

I dropped the paper, as my eyes filled with tears. My name, of course, is not Watson.

3) At the Martian Embassy

The address, it turned out, was of a rather large house in Stepney of all places, which, upon reaching it, I discovered to be the Martian Embassy. After the unfortunate events a few years earlier, the Martians had established an uneasy peace, and were Britain’s allies in the web of alliances between great powers that at that time was so competently keeping that peace between nations. While many in the Empire were unhappy with making common cause with a power that had so recently tried to invade and conquer Britain, it was considered slightly

preferable to forming an alliance with the Germans; an opinion with which I concurred.

I knocked on the door of the imposing building, and was greeted, unsurprisingly, by a human. Earth's atmosphere is uncongenial to the Martians, and so much of their work on this planet was performed by human … collaborators is a word with overtones and connotations I do not intend, so perhaps I should just call them employees.

I was welcomed inside, and was surprised to find that even though this was a normal house on a normal London street, the house was decorated in the traditional Martian style. Within the walls, there were no straight lines whatsoever – the decorators had made sure that the corners were carefully rounded off, and that the lighting was tinged with that red which characterises the Martian atmosphere. I assume, though I have no way of knowing for sure, that the thinking was that while the Martian masters would not be there regularly, they needed to be accommodated in these small details to compensate for the more obvious differences between their environment and our own Earth conditions.

But those visits were infrequent. While the Martians had quickly developed vaccines for our most common illnesses, there were still pathogens which were unknown to them and which their underdeveloped immune systems were not capable of surviving. A Martian would only risk visiting Earth in the gravest emergency.

And apparently this was one such emergency, because when I was ushered through into a conference room to meet my friend, there was one of the Martians deep in conversation with him. I have to admit to an involuntary shudder at seeing one of those octopoid creatures in the flesh, though it was quickly followed by a revulsion at myself at giving in to the kind of prejudices I had spent much of my life opposing. I reminded myself that the Martians were sentient beings and God's creatures like ourselves, and that they were in many ways our equals, and I do not believe the Martian will have noticed my initial hesitation to enter the room.

Sherlock invited me to pull up a chair – I noticed they were three-legged stools, in a design which was clearly reminiscent of the aliens' own machines, though equally clearly of Earthly rather than celestial origin – and introduced me to the Martian ambassador, whose name, shamefully, I have forgotten. He explained to me what I had already deduced – that the ambassador was on Earth on a mission of some moment – and then he said words that I can still hear to this day.

'The Martians are concerned about what we might term my Ruritanian

problem.'

I must admit I was stunned. While my friend's mental state was, of course, of great concern to me, and I could even imagine it having some small bearing on world affairs given the role he had played in the lives of Queens, Dukes, and Popes over the years, I could not possibly imagine how his deterioration would be important on an interplanetary scale – and if it was, things were much worse than I was capable of comprehending.

I expressed as much to Sherlock, and he quickly corrected my misapprehension.

'Oh, I'm not talking about my own faculties going. That is, of course, to be expected, and shall undoubtedly cause us some problems. But I have always endeavoured to forget the trivial and irrelevant anyway, and so the occasional loss of a name or date, while my reasoning is still intact, is of little moment. But the Ruritanian question is not one that springs from that particular source. After much investigation of a parallel matter, our Martian clients have reached the same conclusion as I – that the book which I sent you to obtain, and which I observe you were unable to acquire, is the source of their problem, and my own, and of many other mysteries I had hitherto been unable to solve.'

I wondered if my friend was perhaps fooling himself on this matter, but I said nothing. Either Sherlock had really stumbled on to a problem that was affecting both the Earth and Mars, or he had found a comforting story to tell himself about his own declining powers. Either way, my role would have to be the same – to be Holmes' loyal friend, and to encourage him in his investigation. Should the investigation prove futile, well, that was not the end of the world, and it would do him some good to have something to distract him from his deterioration.

'I see you are unsure about what Mr. Holmes is saying,' said the Martian ambassador, surprising me as I had been unaware that Martians were capable of conversing in human tongues. 'I assure you, I should not be on this planet were this matter of anything other than the gravest severity.'

I nodded. 'Believe me, your Excellency, I have no doubt at all that anything that would bring you to Earth would have to be a matter which could not be solved in any other fashion. But what, exactly, is the problem which has caused you to travel so far?'

The ambassador replied 'It would be easier to show you than to explain, and I suspect also more convincing. It is dark now, yes?' Holmes nodded. 'Then I shall show you exactly what has caused me to make the journey. Follow me.'

The Martian led me to what I would now know as a lift, though back then I had not encountered such a device, and brought me up to the roof of the Embassy. The Ambassador gestured with a tentacle to a large telescope on the roof, pointed

directly towards Mars, which was high in the night sky.

'Take a look and see for yourself.'

I approached the telescope and looked through, to see the surface of Mars. It took a while for me to realise what I was seeing, but once I did I was horrified.

I gazed at the surface of the planet and felt as if my bowels had dropped a foot. My head swam and it took all my reserves of energy to continue standing and not collapse to the ground. What I was seeing simply couldn't be the truth, but it was.

The canals had disappeared.

4) The Martian Ambassador Explains

We made our way back down to the conference room, where Sherlock was still sitting, waiting patiently for our return. I must confess I found it difficult to walk, as what I had seen had shaken me so profoundly, and it had forced me to question everything I knew about the world.

Sherlock looked at me with some concern. 'I see you now begin to understand,' he said in a soft voice. 'Perhaps you are now willing to credit my memories of Ruritania?'

'But when did this happen?' I asked. 'The canals would take years to fill in. Decades! There is no way I can imagine in which such a feat of engineering could be carried out, certainly without it having been noticed before now and reported in the *Times*. Who did this? And why? Surely those canals were necessary to provide drinking water for the Martian people? What provision has been made for them, now the canals have gone?'

'I can answer all those questions quite simply,' said the Ambassador. 'The canals were there three months ago when I departed on my journey to Earth, and I have no reason to believe they were not there as late as last night. It was not their vanishment that necessitated my journey but a lesser disappearance which reduced Mars' famous Pyramids to a single surviving example. Nevertheless they are now an even more striking instance of the effect: that even an earthman might note. Nor did anyone fill them in. They have gone, and I fear that Martian civilisation – and possibly the entire Martian race – may soon be gone along with them.'

'But…but that's just not possible!' I protested. 'How can a network of canals, spanning an entire planet, disappear overnight? I cannot credit such an occurrence. I should rather disbelieve my own eyes, or perhaps believe that your telescope is no telescope at all but some form of magic lantern or similar parlour trick.'

‘Nevertheless,’ said Holmes, ‘what the Ambassador says is the simple truth. We are living in strange times, my friend, and we are civilians in the midst of a war whose combatants care not how many casualties they inflict on us.’

‘War? What do you mean war? We’ve been at peace since…er…’ I realised that the unpleasantness between Earth and Mars of a few years prior might be a painful subject for the Ambassador, and dropped that line of thought. ‘I mean, there’s no war. The British Empire has never seen a more sustained period of peace!’

‘There are places other than Earth, and indeed other than Mars, and beings whose concerns we are unable to comprehend,’ replied Holmes. ‘There are beings we may as well consider Gods, and their conflicts are not fought with cannon and battleships, but with ideas. And a strong enough idea can reshape reality.’

‘An idea can…wait. You’re talking about magic. You’re talking about people’s minds changing the world. That’s magic. Are you saying magic exists?’

‘Well, yes and no. Yes, magic exists, but no, ‘people’ have nothing to do with it. The beings we are talking about are not people in any sense we would use the term. They are much more than that. One might call them living ideas, and wherever and whenever they go, they reshape reality around themselves. The very currents of history are shaped to their whims, and a mere thought from them can cause a civilisation to rise or fall. One might think of them as impingements on reality of the eternal forms your Earth philosopher Plato wrote so eloquently about. They are eternal, and exist in all times and all places at their whim.’

‘And such beings are at war? This is surely nonsense! What could possibly threaten such beings?’

‘What indeed?’ asked the Martian ambassador, and I felt my skin crawl as I understood the enormity of that simple question.

Holmes turned to me, and elaborated on the ambassador’s tale. ‘Be in no doubt that this conflict exists. I have been aware of it for some time, the way one becomes aware of a slight tuning error in one of the second violins in an orchestra – a tiny discordant note, almost imperceptible, in the music of the world. One can’t, of course, notice its effects directly for the most part – in my investigation I have found some people who claim to have memories of changes in the world, but very few, and far fewer than the extent of the changes would suggest – but one can notice them indirectly, in things which once made sense and now no longer do so. And the effects of the conflict are now becoming more evident. To extend my metaphor, where previously it was a single second violinist slightly out of tune, now the whole string section is playing in some temperament more suited for a continental orchestra than a British, while the bassoons are attempting to

play the clarinet line. For one such as myself, whose whole means of existence is predicated upon an ability to notice the smallest of discords, such a situation is unconscionable. The world is slowly becoming a veritable hell for men such as myself, and it is my most fervent intention to trace the problem to its cause. Are you with me?'

I could say nothing other than 'Yes,' and so that was my only reply.

5) The Brink of War

That night, I had strange and concerning dreams, of demons trapped in pyramids, of squamous cephalopodic beasts, akin to the Martians but infinitely more gargantuan and grotesque, rising from the sea and devouring mankind. I dreamed of men who could change their appearance as other men may change their waistcoats, and of bombs which could destroy entire cities. If such awesome marvels as Holmes and the ambassador had described were indeed walking among us, rewriting past and future to suit their present whims, what guarantee had I that my own existence was on any firmer ground? Would I awake to discover I no longer existed?

I woke to find that I was, in fact, still corporeal – and, happily, that breakfasting on bacon, eggs, and kippers was still the custom. I was half expecting to have woken into a world in which one could expect to break one's fast instead on mock turtle soup and dodos' eggs, but the normalcy of a good English breakfast and a refreshing cup of tea soon allowed me to find the humour in the situation. Of course the world was as it had always been – how could it be other? No doubt there would be a perfectly reasonable explanation for the Martian canals' absence – perhaps some strange meteorological phenomena had obscured them – and we should soon see their appearance again.

I was in this mood right up until I picked up my copy of the *Times* and turned past the advertisements to the first page of actual news. What I read there might as well have been about Wonderland, for all the similarity it bore to the world I knew. The newspaper told of a siege and gunfight, between Russian anarchists and the British police. Winston Churchill, the Home Secretary, had attended, as had the army. A building had caught on fire, and several people had been shot.

None of this made sense. Russian anarchists in London? Winston Churchill the Home Secretary? The army being called in to shoot at people in Britain? When I had gone to bed, Churchill was a minor author, Russian anarchists were as unknown in the city as dragons were, and the world had made a great deal more sense.

Yet none of that was the most astonishing matter to be found in those paragraphs. That was one detail which, I am sure, no other readers found even slightly unremarkable – the address of the building which had burned to the ground.

For I had been in 100 Sidney Street at the time of the fire. It was the address of the Martian embassy.

I paged through the rest of the newspaper in a panic, looking in vain for any mention of Mars, and found none. It was as if the whole Martian invasion and its aftermath had been surgically excised from history. And it had left a gaping wound in the body politic which everyone seemed to be ignoring. There had been no Russian anarchists in the world when I had gone to bed – the Russian government had been reorganised in 1905, under rational lines inspired by one of Mars' great scientists, and Russia was now regarded as a model of enlightened government. Yet from what little I could glean of that country's politics from the newspaper, it was now a despotism, possibly even worse than it had been before the 1905 reorganisation.

That was not the only change I noticed. The King was mentioned – but it was King *George*, the man I had known as the Prince of Wales, not Edward VII who had been monarch when I had gone to bed. Up until that point, I had been prepared to believe that I had merely been mistaken about the address – the thought had even occurred to me that there might be two Sidney Streets in Stepney, as ludicrous as it sounds – yet I had no doubt at all that I should have remembered being informed of the King's death.

No, history had changed while I slept. There was no other explanation.

I called on Holmes that afternoon – for once he was in his lodgings at Baker Street – and informed him of the conclusion to which I had arrived. He seemed unsurprised, though concerned for my own well-being.

'I rather expected something of the sort, I'm afraid. Once the Martians had disappeared from their own planet, their disappearance from our own was only a matter of time. And whatever malignant force has caused this disappearance, it has cauterised the wound in reality with the conflagration that has destroyed the building in which they had previously made their abode. A most elegant solution, though not one which I could admire for its morality.'

'Holmes, you're talking as if you have some understanding of what's causing all this. If you do, please explain it to me, before I start to believe I am going mad!'

'So you are convinced now that my Ruritanian problem is not merely a defect in my own reasoning powers?'

'Yes…d_n it all, yes, I am! The world is changing around us, and everyone is

acting as if it has always been this way! What is causing this, Holmes? I pray God it is something which we can stop, or even reverse!'

Holmes paused to collect his thoughts. 'Do you have any memory of the conversation we had with the Martian ambassador? Your memory on that matter is still intact?'

'Yes, I believe so. The ambassador talked of a war between powerful factions of gods – a war between ideas, Platonic forms.'

'That appears to be the size of things, yes.'

'But how can Platonic forms be at war, Holmes? They're eternal and unchanging – that's what it means to be one. A triangle can't go to war with the concept of justice!'

'Ah, but it can. And indeed that is precisely what is happening. Have you ever heard of non-Euclidean geometry?'

'I confess I have not.'

'It is a branch of the pure mathematics originally conceived by Herr Gauss, but taken to its most refined form by my old adversary Professor Moriarty, whose observations of asteroidal dynamics led him to create his famous theory of relativity, which is only now, some thirty years later, gaining widespread acceptance. It is a mathematics in which a triangle may have angles which add up to more than – or less than – one hundred and eighty degrees. A mathematics, in short, in which a triangle is not a triangle. And Moriarty showed, with his astronomical observations, that this is the mathematics which actually applies to our own universe. Triangles as we understand them now exist only in men's heads – the real world now only has triangles which are not triangles at all. A fact about the Platonic Forms which we all know to be true – and to this day one can still prove with ruler and compasses that a triangle must indeed only have one hundred and eighty degrees of angles – is false as it applies to their extrusion into the real world. The triangle – and the square and the circle – are now merely fictions, and we live in a world of non-triangles, non-squares, and non-circles, even though our minds tell us otherwise.'

'Holmes, this sounds like a nonsense!'

'The modern mathematics does, indeed, sound like nonsense, and many men when confronted with the facts simply refuse to acknowledge them. But they remain the facts. And once one has read Moriarty's *On the Dynamics of the Asteroid*, one knows the truth – we are living in the world described in Moriarty's book, not Euclid's.'

I wandered to the spirit case and gasogene, and made myself a strong whisky and soda. I thought about what Holmes had said, while nursing the drink, but I

could not bring myself fully to understand his meaning, and so I sought clarification on the point that confounded me.

'But Holmes, you can't be arguing that Moriarty's book changed the nature of reality?'

'I do not rule out the possibility, though I confess that my own understanding of celestial mechanics was never such that I could have described, prior to Moriarty's work, the current state of affairs. I cannot be sure that the nature of space was ever other than it is. But whether or not he did, one can see from my example how a book can change the nature of reality's relationship with the Platonic forms, yes?'

'I'm not entirely sure I follow, but carry on…'

'Now look at this.'

Holmes handed me a book, and I examined it. *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells. I opened it and noted its indicia, stating it was first published in 1897, and then started to read the opening paragraphs – which I have since committed to memory:

> No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.

'Holmes!' I exclaimed after reading a page or two, 'surely this is a history of the late war? Some evidence that our senses were not mistaken, and our memories not incorrect?'

'Alas, I fear not,' he replied. 'That book did not exist last night. I found it on my bookshelf this morning, in the small section I have devoted to romances. While this book accords with my memories in all its particulars, it nonetheless purports to be a work of fiction, and has been taken as such by the general public, in much the same way as you view Ruritania as an imaginary land rather than the very real place it remains in my own memory.'

'So when you talk about books…are you saying that people are writing books and somehow…capturing reality and making it fictional?'

'Ah!' he laughed, 'so close and yet so far! No, how could *writing* a book make reality into a fiction? No, my contention is that people are *reading* a book, and that book is changing their ideas, and thus the nature of reality. In fact, I believe

they are reading a very specific book.'

6) The Book of the Enemy

Holmes went on to explain that he had heard rumours throughout the underworld for years of a particular book, the reading of which was enough to make men mad. One rumour stated that any man who read more than a few pages of this book – only one copy of which was known to exist – would wander the world in a daze, shouting about wonders and marvels that never existed.

'Yet another rumour is more intriguing still – that any man who read this book would himself disappear from existence altogether, and be forgotten even by his closest friends. Does that remind you of anything, Watson?'

I winced inwardly at the use of his former companion's name, but said nothing – it would have hurt Holmes more than I could ever countenance, to acknowledge his lapse. I replied as if no mistake had been made.

'Yes. It sounds, in fact, like that book is what is causing our problems. But Holmes, how could a single book have such an effect?'

'Have you never read a book which managed to affect you profoundly, which made you see the world in a new light? One which made you, in fact, a different person?'

'I have, on occasion, but that's a different matter, surely?'

'It is merely a matter of degree. A book which is so persuasive that it could affect a man's mind so strongly that reality itself shifted to conform to it – such a book would, I believe, explain all the myriad effects we have experienced, would it not?'

'But Holmes, this is preposterous! A book which can persuade one man, that I can countenance – for some men will undoubtedly fall under the spell of any book, should it be distributed widely enough. But an argument or story which I find persuasive will seem the merest bunkum to a man whose knowledge and experiences are different from mine. An atheist, for example, should hardly find himself persuaded by a book which took the resurrection of Christ as axiomatic, but likewise a Christian will find little persuasive in a work which takes the Gospels as self-evident fakery.'

'That is true of any normal book, yes. But what about a book that alters itself to suit the reader? A book that is, itself, of a greater intelligence than the reader? What could such a book achieve, my dear friend?'

'How can a book be intelligent? That makes no sense at all.'

'On the contrary, it makes a great deal of sense. Books are the link between the

imaginary and the real, between the conceptual realm in which the Platonic forms exist and our own imperfect reality. If these gods of which the Martian ambassador speak can take on mortal flesh, how much easier for one to become bound paper and ink? It is my contention that this book of which I speak is, in fact, a sentient being of great power and deviousness, with an intelligence far outstripping my own. It is a being of pure idea, which is remaking the world in its own image. Every trace of romance is slowly being leached from the world, as it creates in its stead a world which runs on mathematical rules, like those Professor Moriarty discovered. It is a world without the strange and uncanny, without the romantic or the grotesque, a world devoid of mysteries and wonders. That is, ultimately, what this Enemy wishes to create – a world in which we live and die, reproduce, eat, and excrete, but in which the Pyramids are no longer the creation of ancient alien civilisations but merely the tombs of long-dead inbred dictators, in which there are no canals on Mars and no wizards, a world in which none of our actions matter.'

Light dawned. 'It's the book you asked me to retrieve! You intend to destroy it?'

'No, my dear friend, I intend to read it.'

7) The Death of Sherlock Holmes

'But Holmes! You said yourself that reading the book either drives men mad or kills them altogether!'

'I did, didn't I?'

'Then what could you possibly want to read it for?'

He then gave me the saddest smile I have ever seen on a mortal face. 'Ah, but am I not already going mad? My faculties are already dimming, but more than that – I have too many memories of the world as she was. The world in which we are now living is not the world I know, and I suspect it shall only get worse as the book does its work. And I am convinced that the book is too powerful, and too malevolent, for me to resist its aims.'

'No,' he continued, 'I have a simple choice in front of me. Live out the remainder of my days as a deteriorating wreck, unable to understand the horrors I am witnessing, or read the book and in turn be read by it. Perhaps I should even be able to fight its influence more effectively as a fictional character than ever I could as a real, fallible, man.'

I realised that, as always, Holmes was right. I opened my mouth to protest nonetheless, as I wished with all my heart that he would remain in the world with me, but I knew my wishes were pointless, so I mutely handed him the book.

'You should leave,' he said quietly. 'I don't know exactly what will be brought

out of the world with me, and I wish you to come to no harm.'

He stood, and we embraced for the final time, and I have to say that never in my long life have I found it more difficult to let go of someone than in that moment.

'Don't turn back as you leave,' he said to me. 'I shall wait until I hear you go out of the door before I start reading.'

I nodded, unable to speak further, and left 221B Baker Street for the final time. I made my way out of the door, walked down the street, and turned to look back, and the door through which I had left was gone, with no sign that it had ever been present.

My old friend had gone forever, but in a way he hadn't – I soon discovered that in this new world in which I found myself, Watson's tales of the pair's adventures still existed, though they were now fictional stories by one Arthur Conan Doyle. I was even able to follow my old friend in future adventures which took place entirely in the fictional world, including some in which he aided His Majesty's Government in that unspeakable conflict which was soon to engulf the world – a conflict which, I have little doubt, in some way echoed or reflected that larger conflict of which the Martian ambassador had tried to warn me.

I still think of him, every day, and for many years I wondered if perhaps in my own small way I might one day perform some task that would be impressive enough to render me, too, fictional, so I may re-join my friend, whose absence pains me to this day. But eventually I gave up on those hopes. Like so much else in my life, they would go unfulfilled, and I shall do no great deeds in my remaining days, I fear.

And that's my story. I'm sorry it doesn't have a happier ending, but happy endings seem to be one of those things that left the world along with joy, wonder, and gaiety, and with my old friend Sherlock Holmes.

8) The Aftermath

The oldest member had stopped talking, and we sat in silence for some time. He had told his tall tale with a conviction which most of our playful lot were lacking when telling our own Munchausen-esque stories. There had been none of those twinkles and winks with which the majority of our membership signalled to their audience that everything was in fun, and we were unsure in what spirit to take this ending.

'Well, what do you think?'

We all quickly mumbled about how imaginative and inventive he had been,

and he waved his hand.

'Pfah!' he replied, and I remember feeling rather astonished that this was something anyone ever actually said. 'It's nothing. I'm nearly a hundred years old, and so I've had a hundred years to think up one good tale before I die, haven't I?'

One of our less circumspect members asked the oldest member 'so was any of it true? Your news from the doctor?'

He waved his hand again, irritably this time. 'No, of course not. Don't be so stupid, man! I'm clearly in the prime of my life. I'll outlive the lot of you – and I can outdrink the lot of you as well! Who's going to buy me a brandy for my dry mouth?'

We celebrated the rest of the night, and he did indeed seem to have a prodigious capacity for alcohol. I remained sober enough, though, to notice him pick up the book I had been examining, and place it in the pocket of his winter coat. He tried to slip out unnoticed at around three AM, but I caught him by the arm.

'Will we be seeing you next week?' I asked him, as casually as I could.

'Hmm? No, no I think not,' he replied, 'but you may hear from me again.'

He left the club, and his silhouette as he walked into the dark winter's night was the last I ever saw of him.

I don't remember when I left the club myself, or how I got home, but I do remember waking the next morning with a remarkably clear head, as if I had not drunk a drop the night before. I remember also the suspicion that gripped me, and my lack of surprise when I made my way to the club's premises and found no trace of a building there.

In the decades since, I have often thought about that night, as I have made my way through a world which seems meaner and more lacking in magic with every passing day, but there was no sequel to the tale the oldest member had told.

At least, not until today, when I came upon a book on my shelves which I had not placed there myself. It was no leather-bound library edition, yet it was unmistakeably familiar.

I opened it at a random page and read the words 'The tale I have to tell you begins in the long winter of 19_, when I was, if not a young man, certainly a younger man than the one you see before you today.'

I closed the book hurriedly, and placed it back upon the shelf. It was not time to read that book. At least, not yet.

Pre-narrative Briefings D & E

Materials and accounts gathered from such parties as Faction Paradox, are already suspect. They are not themselves the Enemy, but they have been at times useful idiots capering in its shadow. However ignore the full range of sources the good theorist does not. We cannot know at this time, the truth or falsity of the following narrative in its ultimate details, although the majority of it is plainly and simply factual. This may be part of its danger. In my time there was a fiction of an evil man, Doctor Mabuse, who – though he died – still left a testament, an embodiment of his will, by which others were made over into his image. In such stories as these from the legends or propaganda of third parties we see the fingerprints (if fingers they may be said to have) of The Enemy's Testaments.

Irma Ebbinghaus

Pay special attention to what the Faction can experience and express that we cannot. Hush, and grow wise.

Entarodora

Subjective Interlock Beta

I have been thinking about why my brother's wife resents me. It may be because, technically, the house my brother built for her, remains the property of our House, Arpexia, and hence as I am senior – mine and not hers. The cultural politics of ownership are hard for us to grasp: we can own any small thing completely, have it built by unseen engines: keep it as long as needed – destroy it – recreate it, at whim: but the bigger things are assumed to be War-material – the Great Houses' not our own. Owning a house feels to me as unlikely as owning a tree or a forest. Although, oddly perhaps, it also feels less likely than having sole possession of a non-tactically important moon. Maybe I *had* a Moon once. She came, I think – I can't remember – from another culture. To train with us, before the War. It was almost unheard of. She was only the third such outsider in my generation's memory. She chose my brother as an intimate, not over me, we hadn't even met when they decided. I can vaguely see them now in my mind. The three foreigner women, sometimes called the triplets: the warrior-priestess, the loud explosive youngster, and her: the silent representative of the sisterhood. All gone now. Do I remember that or merely base it on my lack of visitors?

It's clear now that I have been injured in some sort of war. A war fought by powers that time travel, that manipulate time and space. On one side: the Great Houses, including what I remember is my own Arpexia, on the other… I'm not sure yet. The briefings can't all be true, and they are contradictory – in so far as I understand them at all. I wonder if the triplets ran off to join up: and if so on what side. With my House or another? Is it possible to change one's House allegiance, in war time? Ever?

T. memeticus: A Morphology

The Head

On a table in the deepest drinking establishment in London, or its near analogue, eight disparate objects lie in a rough circle, like the opening gambit in a memory game.

Clockwise from where Cousin Mace sits, frowning stolidly at the tabletop, there is a saucer-sized device looking like a handheld radio-telescope; a pair of gold-rimmed half-moon spectacles; a wooden-handled handbell; a mobile phone of early-third-millennium manufacture, its screen cracked and dataless; a cuboid chrome box with a speaker grille; an ash-blackened twig; an empty plasdiamond case the size and shape of a drinks coaster; and a brown homburg hat. Each is attached to a luggage label bearing a neat but inscrutable reference code.

There is no obvious linking theme.

To Cousin Braquemard's eyes, the arrangement is irksome. Its combination of randomness and order snags on her mind every time she glances over it. It gives the impression of ritual significance, though as far as she knows there is none. That's just how Cousin Mace set them out, prior to sitting and contemplating them in placid silence for far longer than she'd ordinarily be prepared to put up with.

'Well?' she demands at last, shifting tetchily on the scarlet leatherette. 'Are you getting anything?'

'Not yet.' Cousin Mace continues to stare phlegmatically at the objects. 'Takes a while sometimes.'

Cousin Braquemard tuts.

The walls of The Presidency's Head curve steeply outwards, so that the room is

wider at chest height than at the top and bottom. It looks like what it is – a huge underground pipe in which a concrete floor and perfunctory slatted ceiling have been installed as a reluctant concession to the occupants.

A picture-frame above the counter surrounds an image relayed in real time from the room's template in 1970s London: the staff bar of the 60-metre-deep Kingsway Telephone Exchange facility, originally the Chancery Lane Deep-Level Shelter. The employees in the image are drinking, smoking and chatting surrounded by the gradated browns and oranges typical of their era. Here, in this snowglobe replica of London, the Eleven-Day Empire, the décor has been retouched to black and blood-red. Whether this is an improvement is a matter of taste.

This bar, and this facility, belong to the Stacks, the vast underground tunnel-network of cellars, caverns and inside-pocket universes beneath the crimson-skied shadow of Britain's capital city. Hundreds of miles long and convolutedly, even recursively labyrinthine, the Stacks house the archives of Faction Paradox. The Faction has always taken a keen interest in history – in all histories, whether natural or unnatural – and its vast archival holdings are resistant to conventional storage methods. Sometimes belligerently so.

Braquemard loses patience again. 'Grandfather's sake, are you a psychometrist or aren't you?'

'Dunno really,' Mace says frankly. 'I see stuff, I tell stories about it. Godfather M. says I'm normally right. Call that what you want, I call it luck. Luck and imagination.' It's difficult to imagine anyone looking less imaginative than stoic, slab-faced Cousin Mace, with his wrestler's bulk and his big awkward hands. He counts off the objects several times, eeny-meeny-miney-moeing under his breath. He pauses mid-rhyme. 'Can we take the labels off?'

'No,' Braquemard says. As a Little Sister, she once saw a rookie archivist untie the label from a silver bullet. It passed right through his shoulder and embedded itself in a rock wall.

'All right,' he grunts. 'What's this one?' He prods the handled disc that sits nearest his left hand.

'You're not supposed to know,' Braquemard sighs. She is of his height, but lean and rangy, a stick-figure made of high-tension wire. If you tugged her sleeve to get her attention she would *twang*. The whiplash could sever your arm. 'It contaminates the results. This whole thing works better if you go in blind.'

'So they tell me,' says Cousin Mace. 'Not convinced, myself.'

To be honest, the object is a mystery to Braquemard too. She knows a little more than Mace does: that Father Stendec is on the trail of another of his obscure

cryptids; that he has somehow convinced himself that these eight objects, of all the items held in the Stacks, hold evidence of its existence; and that the psychometrist Cousin is here on loan from Godfather Morlock to attempt to piece together a coherent narrative from these fragments of history. Ultimately, though, she's going in blind too. She's here to take note of what Mace says, and to make sure he doesn't go wandering off into the Stacks and end up torn, defaced or stolen.

He picks up the device in one meaty hand and sniffs it. 'It's hot,' he says.

Cousin Braquemard leans forward, alarmed. 'It shouldn't be.'

Mace sighs, a heavy quick puff like a steam-train. 'I don't mean *is* is,' he says. 'I'm starting the thing.'

Braquemard raises her palms. 'My mistake. Go ahead.'

He frowns, geological creases appearing in his craglike forehead. 'It's a weapon,' he says. 'This bloke's using it to burn stuff up. Well, I say *bloke*.'

And taking the items before him one at a time, from left and right in turn, he tells Cousin Braquemard what he thinks their stories might be.

L1

In the steamy depths of the submersible cowered Morrahaurm, cramming her frame against the bulkhead like a new-hatched child retreating back into the egg.

Somewhere nearby, she knew in her lowerbrain, Kotdel was hunting her, a thermal projector from the armoury in his claw. It would be an easy hunt. Like most of the crew he came from a carnivore kindred, and they were sleek, agile and impossibly quick. Her mass alone would have made Morrahaurm the most conspicuous individual on board, even without the horns and crest majestically adorning her high forehead. Among her own she was known as a beauty, a graceful dancer and no mean athlete: here she was simply a bulky, lumbering target.

Footsteps, measured but swift, were approaching along the gangway, the other side of the bulkhead. Morrahaurm shrank down further, covering her eyes with her claws. She had to get to the bridge, to warn Kotdel's fellow Triad members, and Commander Auxtac, that their comrade had departed from his senses.

She should never have come here. Transporting one of her kindred aboard a submersible was a ludicrous idea. She was a strong surface swimmer, but quite incapable of diving, even had the protective suit been made that would fit her. Had any lighter, sleeker xenoarchaeologists been available, she was sure she would never have been recruited for this expedition.

But the wreck, first seen from the air by a migratory tribe of the flying kindred en route from the tropical swelter of the Oriental Archipelago to the temperate climes of the Austral Spur, had confirmed to the profile of no known vessel from any of the saurian kindred, and Morrahaurm had been the only specialist available. And so, with many misgivings, she had embarked.

The tense week's voyage in the submersible, munching on fodder bars and suffering everyone else's fishy breath even as they complained of her methane emissions, had been richly compensated for by her observations since arrival. Though hampered by relying on remote submarine drones, and the warriors of the graceful aquatic kindred who formed the bulk of the crew, she speedily established beyond question that the site was legitimate, one of those rare relics of extraterrestrial visitors to the Earth.

The vessel's sinuous profile, twisted like a nest of snakes turned suddenly to stone, its construction and even its material (though enough like marble to deceive the casual eye) matched no prior instances of which Morrahaurm was aware. It had clearly been in place for some time, long enough for coral to grow around and across its surface, turning it into a habitat for brightly-coloured fish, anemones, and little octopuses.

No records existed of any meteor impacts in this area, which Imp'lok, the scientist of the Triad, suggested must confirm the extreme age of the wreck. Morrahaurm was unconvinced. If this had indeed been a functioning vessel, might it not have arrived elsewhere in Earth's oceans, and travelled underwater until its systems failed? Indeed, if its mechanisms were sufficiently advanced, might it not simply have *arrived* here without an intervening descent? Might it not even (and she was still not sure what prompted such an unscientific thought) have embedded itself in the coral deliberately, in an accelerated timeframe, as a form of chronological camouflage?

With the help of the drones and warriors Morrahaurm had quickly built up a three-dimensional model of the wreck's external hull, but its interior proved bafflingly resistant to sonar mapping. It was unfortunate, therefore, that she had been in her cabin, honking in her sleep like a hadrosaur, when three of the warriors had discovered the hatch.

More unfortunate still that they had contacted Kotdel, the youngest of the Triad, with their news, rather than Morrahaurm herself. By the time Morrahaurm had been roused, Kotdel had donned one of the submersible's pressure suits and claimed from the grudging warriors the glory of first entry into the vessel.

(Now, beyond the bulkhead, the footsteps receded along the gangway. Morrahaurm waited until they had disappeared completely, let out the quietest,

deepest breath she could expel, and then stampeded for the nearest companionway.)

She had reviewed the record of the sortie into the wreck. Kotdel had taken no recording device, the irresponsible amateur: only one of the warriors – who had, after an anxious wait, swum inside after him – had rectified that deficit.

Their route into the wreck had been a spiralling, tapering hole, opening as if burrowed into what their previous surveys had found to be a solid and unbroken section of hull. Marine creatures swam and crawled in and out of it, unconcerned and unaware that this intriguing cavern had been absent a mere day before. The warriors had found Kotdel eventually, deep inside, staring like one hypnotised at the smooth rounded end of the passageway.

The explorers had encountered no branches to the tunnel, and for all they had seen the rest of the wreck might be solid all the way through. Certainly there was no further ingress to be found, so by mutual agreement the party had returned to the submersible.

(Morrahaurm clambered up the companionway until she reached the upper deck, then charged like a startled sauropod for the control room itself.)

Musing on the incident later, Morrahaurm had realised that the footage had been interfered with, somehow. The tunnel might have twisted, but its recorded directions and dimensions meant that it should have protruded some distance from the far side of the wreck – where the drones had recorded no such protrusion, even a temporary one. Troubled, she had returned to the submersible's camera suite to check the records.

It was at this point that she had discovered Kotdel with the thermal projector, diligently melting every recording medium in the room. And it was only a moment later that she had become his prey…

Now Morrahaurm burst onto the bridge, all decorum abandoned. Let them see her as a terrified herbivore, panicked by a glimpse of a predator in the grass: it was the truth, and could only lend credence to what she had to tell them.

She knew Kotdel had not been merely covering up his own rashness; she had seen the extent of the damage, in the brief glimpse available to her before her lowerbrain took control of her legs and she fled. All the data was now gone: the three-dimensional model; her abortive attempts to analyse the surface material; even Imp'lok's observations of the local marine species. Kotdel had erased all the evidence that the wreck existed.

Morrahaurm's head had been lowered defensively as she ran, but now she raised it as she entered the bridge, the names of Imp'lok, Miscus and Commander Auxtac on her beak.

The sight of the carnage, and of Kotdel standing triumphantly over their smouldering bodies, reached her eyes just as her nostrils registered the stench of cooked meat.

R1

Many old cities preserve the history of their growth like the rings of a tree. The most ancient buildings stand in the city centre, some of them ruined, perhaps within some remnants of an ancient wall, while further rings of construction, the accretions of later generations, spread out across kilometres and centuries to the newest warehouse districts and outermost dormitory suburbs.

The depredations of time mean that most cities preserve only a vestige of their heritage in this way. Thanks to one of the more exotic instances of fallout of the War in Heaven, however, the city of Antivocallio literally existed in concentric zones of historical time.

In its centre was a park, a grassy riverbank hosting a tented encampment of soldiers, the city's standing army. Around this stood a picketed stockade of low wooden dwellings, Antivocallio's poorest quarter. Beyond them, better-built two-storey houses clustered between a few stone civic buildings on a grander scale: the city hall, cathedral and guildhall; all within a solid stone wall. Then came the businesses, the banks, the law courts and the university, their premises executed in more grandiose designs of stone and slate; the factories then, brick-built and smoking, with their attendant workers' slums. The railway terminus was located in this ring, and from here trams and omnibuses ran. More businesses followed, offices mostly, their concrete slabs giving way to towering glass-and-metal constructions; around them stood tenements and terraces of suburban houses, and the university's science park. Beyond them were the new-build developments, crescent upon close of identical attractive three- and four-bedroomed houses, served by family-friendly pubs with soft play areas and screens showing constant sport.

George Stillsome lived in the inner suburbs with his wife, children and dog in a semi-detached house with a picket fence and a driveway, but he worked much closer to Antivocallio's centre. Every workday morning he got up, patted the dog, shaved, donned his suit, read his newspaper, ate the breakfast his wife prepared for him, kissed his son and daughter goodbye, put on his homburg hat, and smoked a pipe as he waited at the bus stop. He took a bus inward through the industrial and mercantile districts, until the streets became too small to let it pass. He dismounted, smiling and nodding at his fellow commuters as they dispersed into the narrow alleys between and beneath the district's overhanging houses.

George worked as a manager at Wᵐ Aſkin & Sons, in the shadow of the city walls. The printworks took in manuscripts drawn up by the monks in the cathedral scriptorium and rendered them in moveable type, before passing the printed books on to a publisher in one of the outer districts, who turned them into mass-market paperbacks for eventual digitisation in the dotcom start-ups on the city boundaries.

Today George was supervising the printing of a bestiary, beautifully illuminated by the monks with images of camelopards, leviathans, amphisbaenas and vegetable lambs. Aſkin's engraver had done his best to copy the illustrations, but the printed versions would look crude at best. The vellum folio would fade and crumble, George knew, if taken directly to the e-publishers, and no camera would function here in the inner districts. Their best approach would be to hire a local painter to reproduce the best illuminations on more durable canvas, to be scanned for the electronic version the city would eventually export.

This morning, however, George had more pressing problems.

'How thinkest thou we might print this then, Master Stillsome?' demanded Jenkin the pressman before George had even removed his hat, waving a vellum sheet in his face. '"Tis all besmeared and smirched with spilled ink, dost not see?'

'I surely do,' George murmured, taking the sheet. The greater part of the text and illustration were covered with a big black blot, leaving only fragments visible. Whatever animal this page described lived in the sea, but that was about all the information he could gather.

Calling in the office boy, he sent him scurrying through the narrow streets to the old town, to seek out the copyists at the scriptorium and ask them what they thought they were playing at, sending out this kind of spoiled workmanship.

He then started flicking through the archives of folio volumes that had already passed through Aſkin's hands.

A moment later, however, Jenkin the pressman came back, shamefaced. 'I fear me I have borne false witneſs,' he said. He carried, by the scruff of the neck, an ink-drenched cat. 'See, the fault lieth not with the good monks, but with this devil.'

'I guess it broke a bottle,' George concluded sagely as the man threw the animal out of the door. It hissed at him and pelted off down the street.

Jenkin frowned. 'Much ink befouled the floor, 'tis true, and the beast is smothered therein. Yet found I no bottle broke, nor none empty.'

'Huh,' said George. 'One of life's little mysteries, I guess. See here Jenkin, I've found a page we can reuse instead. It's cheating a little, but the e-publishers never read these things. It's from a book of seafarers' tales. Some poor sailors land on an

island and go ashore, but then it dives and drowns them all, because it was actually a kraken. That's probably what that page was about anyway, wouldn't you say?'

L2

'God's teeth!' The Governor of the Exchequer Islands blenched, and looked as if he might be about to be sick. 'What kind of creature does *that* to a man?'

Captain Mason exchanged a look with his lieutenant. 'Why, no creature but man himself, Sir Archibald. See, the wound has been made with a saw – the very bone-saw, I would aver, which lies bloody in the basin by the door. It belongs, I'll wager, to the medical bag which Dr Smallcoate brought with him to minister to his patients here.'

'Well, of course I can see *that*,' Sir Archibald Hammock blustered. 'A child of five could see *that*, Captain. I ask again, what manner of creatures are these natives, that they would do such a thing to a white man?'

Mason frowned across at the doorway to the one-roomed wooden surgery, where Noah stood impassively. The deceased's native manservant and orderly did not seem to react to the governor's characterisation of his compatriots.

Before them, Dr Philemon Smallcoate sat in the corner that for these past five years had served as his study. His writing materials were laid out before him on his desk, along with a burnt-out candle and a pair of gold-rimmed half-moon spectacles. He wore his black coat still, though his wig lay discarded upon his bed.

The top of his head was missing – or rather was present, but sat in his porcelain washbasin next to the bone-saw Mason had mentioned. It was a dome of bone, skin and close-cropped grey hair, looking a little like a piece of rabbit-skin. It had been neatly removed, perhaps two inches beneath the crown, with a neat incision which ran around above the eyebrows and ears.

His brain – well yes, that was certainly missing.

Sir Archibald was saying, 'My father once told me he heard of such a thing, in the Orient. They break open the skulls of monkeys and eat their brains while the blighters are still alive.' He shuddered and added, 'Filthy brutes,' though whether referring to monkeys or Orientals Captain Mason could not ascertain.

The Captain picked up the notebook from Smallcoate's desk. A number of pages had been ripped from disparate places through the volume, and those remaining were smeared with blood.

'What's that?' the governor asked, immediately suspicious, as Mason suspected

he generally was of books.

Mason looked at its first pages. ‘It seems to be Dr Smallcoate’s observations of the customs and legends of the natives of these islands, sir. He has written of them at some length, and, to judge by the dates, throughout the duration of his tenure here. He may have meant to publish them on his return. He was to leave for England on the *Probity*, was he not?’

Sir Archibald snorted. ‘Publish ’em? The natives’ mumbo-jumbo? Who’d be interested in such a thing?’

Lieutenant Tankerville spoke up. ‘By your leave, sir, Dr Smallcoate was a member of the Royal Anthropological Society. They’re very interested in the beliefs of the islanders. Did you know they believe they’re descended from fish? The natives, I mean, sir, not the Anthropological Society.’

‘I am most indebted to you, Lieutenant,’ sneered Sir Archibald. ‘Next time I require an introduction to a halibut I shall know which of its relatives to ask.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Tankerville, abashed.

Now Tankerville had mentioned it, though, Mason recalled the doctor expounding at some length on these legends at a dinner party on board the Captain’s own ship, the HMS *Tenacity*. What had he said? *Our own Queen Anne islanders speak of the ancestor spirit, the* tangaloa*, a monstrous sea-creature combining the appearances of many: a crab’s claws, the arms of a squid, the trailing tentacles of a jellyfish. Of such a general belief I can find echoes in the legends of the Hawaiians, the Japanese Ainu and the Mayakai… However, the Queen Annians believe specifically that man, or one particular kind of men, dwelt once in the sea before emerging onto land and growing the arms, legs and lungs required for terrestrial life…*

Mason flicked through the notebook, but could see no reference to such a legend. He dismissed it from his mind.

‘Mind you,’ added Sir Archibald, amused now, ‘I have said often that there is something of the eel about the natives here. Why, the smell alone indicates such a pedigree.’

‘The natives make their living by fishing, sir,’ Mason noted, with a pained glance at the expressionless Noah. ‘The smell is to be expected. Sir Archibald, there is something that concerns me.’

‘A man of science investing himself in such heathen nonsense, do you mean?’ Hammock snapped. ‘Or the same man getting his head sawn in half and his brain eaten? I think we can all see that Smallcoate reaped what he sowed. He must have pried too closely into one of their filthy pagan mysteries, and the devils killed him for it.’

‘I’m not so sure of that,’ Mason replied. ‘You know, sir, that Noah called upon

my men to break the door down, after he became alarmed at his employer's silence upon knocking. You can see yourself where the wood is splintered about the lock.' Locks were rare on the island, but Dr Smallcoate had been concerned about the safety of his expensive medical supplies. 'Nowhere else is there any indication of forced ingress.' At Smallcoate's insistence the surgery's window had been boarded up, as he was a light sleeper and found the tropical sunrise awoke him early. Most of his actual consultation work had been carried out on the hut's veranda, generally with the aid of a glass of rum.

'Well then, the fellows tidied up after themselves,' said Sir Archibald, but he looked uneasy. The natives were unfamiliar with the concept of locks: Mason knew that the Governor had had great trouble training his own servants to understand that sometimes doors would, correctly, not open for them.

'Yet the key lies before him on the desk, sir,' Mason pointed out. 'Dr Smallcoate kept it about himself at all times. And the only other point where someone might have entered is there.' He pointed at a gap between two bent pieces of timber, high in the wall. In cooler climes it would have been filled in when the wall was built, but in the tropics one could afford to take a more generous view of such building flaws.

Sir Archibald stared. 'There? That opening would scarcely accommodate a cat.' He was right, although at that point in history the domestic cat had not, in any case, been introduced to Queen Anne Island.

'Indeed, sir,' Mason said. 'See, though, where the boards beneath are wet.'

'God's stones,' said the governor, staring where he indicated. 'Is it blood?'

Tankerville, who was nearest, touched the stain. He gazed at his wet fingers, then sniffed them. 'No, Sir Archibald; I'd say it was seawater. And, sir… there is a very distinct smell of fish…'

R2

'Pontifical Swiss Guard! Open up!' came a bellow through the intercom, audible even over the tolling of the alarm-tocsin. Sister Hilda palmed the switch and the reinforced steel doors slid apart, retracting into the marble pillars either side. At once the harlequin-striped commando squad came in at a jog, and took up a defensive position at the entrance to the Collection of Necessary Secrets, Heckler & Zeiss pulse-rifles at the ready.

'The fucker went that way!' the nun yelled, pointing down the pillared cloisters towards the Vault of Self-Evident Heresies. The guard sergeant made a sequence of hand-gestures, and the bulk of her squad ran to follow, the troops on point

training their weapons through doors and side-passages as they passed.

Two of the guards, a man and woman in blue-and-yellow fatigues, stayed at the front desk with Hilda and Brother Wilbraham. The old man's breathing was shallow now, and his face was taking on a bluish tinge.

'It bit him?' the man asked, taking off his plasdiamond-fibre morion helmet. His colleague, more cautious, merely put up her visor.

The guard pulled out a medical kit as Sister Hilda showed him the twin puncture wounds on the old monk's neck. 'The asshole jumped him,' she said, smoothing her pectoral cross. 'I clicked my panic button, it grabbed something from a shelf and ran for the cloisters.'

The medic moved to place a dressing on Brother Wilbraham's neck, but his comrade stayed his hand. She peered in closer.

'Those marks aren't usual,' she said. 'The flesh isn't pierced so much as… puckered? We might be looking at a new bloodline here. Did the hostile look normal to you?'

'It *looked* like Sister Sexburga from Applied Neurotheology,' said Sister Hilda. She's been looking into weaponising the remote stimulation of the temporal lobes. The bitch said she wanted to consult the Ramachandran Codex.'

'They must have infected her at a seminar or something,' said the medic. 'Though how she got in through the screening…'

Each of them shuddered. These days it was impossible to enter the Vatican without standing in a communion line, filing through a security solarium and stripping for the holy water showers – and that was leaving aside the fact that the entire Holy See was sacred ground. The prospect of a Mal'akh bloodline developing multiple immunities had been Pope Beatrix's greatest fear since she had declared the creatures anathema as distortions of God's image, and begun her great Crusade against them.

A scream rang out from the cloisters, and the unconscious Brother Wilbraham moaned.

The medic slapped the allium poultice in place. 'We have to get him to a medical solarium, stat,' he said. 'Hook him up to a silver-suspension drip and get a Cardinal-Intercessory to pray over him. But most of all we need to terminate his assailant. If we do all that, he should pull through.'

'So take him,' Sister Hilda said.

The woman guard said, 'Sister, you're in danger here. You should –'

'Screw that,' said Sister Hilda. The Collection had had an archivist on duty continually since its foundation, except a couple of times during the dysentery outbreak of 1486. 'Take your patient, soldier, I'm staying right the fuck here.'

The medic nodded, hefted Brother Wilbraham's slight frame in his arms, and left.

More screams – definitely multiple voices this time – resounded through the archive.

'Jesus Christ,' the Swiss Guard whispered.

'Watch your language,' Sister Hilda snapped.

A moment later the Guard's communicator tolled. She listened, then said, 'Confirm all clear.' Then she turned to the nun with a grin. 'Hostile's down. Stay here.'

She set off down the cloisters at a run, Sister Hilda following at her heels.

Outside the entrance to the Vault they found three injured Swiss Guards being tended by their comrades, and the rest of the troop standing staring at a patch of empty flagstone.

'It just… dissolved,' one of them said.

The sergeant turned to them, still holding her sharpened carbon-fibre baton. 'I've never seen a termination like it. No bones, no ash, no dust. It writhed like a nest of maggots, then it was like they all burrowed away into the floor.' She poked the obviously unbroken flagstone with the toe of her boot. 'Has to be a new bloodline. Her Holiness is not going to be happy.'

Sister Hilda had picked up a plasdiamond case from the floor. It flapped open, empty. 'Well, this is fucking bizarre. Was it holding a DVD when you terminated it? Antique data storage format that looks like a shimmery plastic wheel?'

'Yeah, I saw that,' said one of the guards, and a couple of others nodded.

'Must have dissolved with it,' said the sergeant. 'Anything important?'

Sister Hilda stares at the case. 'Yeah, not exactly. It's a 21st-century documentary called *Monsters of the Deep*, about weird marine biology.'

'Why would you keep that here?' her first guard asked.

'That's not the point,' said Sister Hilda. 'Why the crap would a Mal'akh risk its unlife to *steal* it?'

L3

They thought of themselves as guiding the cosmos, though the word they used for 'guide' carried overtones of 'guardian', 'genius' and 'spirit'. Their world was a vast, dark Dyson sphere surrounding a primordial black hole of infamous repute.

Since ancient times, their achievements had been legendary: psionic control, manipulation of the elements, conversion of matter to energy at will. They visited lesser worlds and offered pacts to the peoples they found there; giving them

knowledge in return for their allegiance, advancing their evolution in exchange for the fruits of their developing intelligences. Their successful experiments they brought to live with them in the limitless darkness of their world. There they cultivated them: pricking their ingenuity, feeding the flames of their invention, goading them on to ever-greater accomplishments.

Their failed experiments they dispassionately terminated.

Their intellects were as far beyond those of humanity as that of a whale beyond a barnacle, and their morality was not that of other species. They did what they wished, and that was the whole of their law. An act of self-sacrifice would have destroyed them.

Like their peers of the Osirian Court, with whom they exchanged ambassadors, they were sufficiently advanced to also have relations – diplomatic, scientific, social; even sexual on the rare occasions both parties so wished – with the Great Houses of the Homeworld.

The Homeworld's Ambassador to the Infernal Sphere was named Lady Thelema, and she had been summoned by the Prince Baphomet.

She stood before him and his concubine, robed and skullcapped in the manner of her people, outside the ritual seven-pointed star in which he sat enthroned. Around his ceremonial dais, the black iron walls of the sphere curved away into the astronomical distance, punctuated by fire and distant screams. Above them, held in equilibrium at the structure's very centre, the black hole roiled invisibly, bathing them all in arcane radiations. The atmosphere tasted of metal and of blood.

Like the Osirians, the sphere-dwellers could take on any shape they wished – and any size. Baphomet was skyscraper-tall, goat-headed and hooved, winged and woman-breasted, with a pentagram on his forehead and a flaming torch emerging from his cranium. He wore a caduceus, and juggled crescent moons.

The Lady Thelema – who conformed to the standard body-type of her people, and could not have changed it without a catastrophic process of biological rearrangement which would have been both painful and messy – may or may not have been impressed.

Baphomet's concubine Byzo was not. She wore her favourite form – bat-winged, antlered, with the head and hooves of a horse – and out of politeness had manifested herself at barely twice the Lady's minuscule height. At their present sizes she would have had difficulty scaling Baphomet's cloven hoof.

'WE HAVE FOUND SOMETHING YOUR HOUSES HAVE LOST,' Byzo told Thelema. Far above her head, her master neither looked down nor paused in his juggling. 'WE WOULD TRADE ITS LOCATION WITH YOU.'

‘Bargain for knowledge with one of you?’ Thelema laughed easily. ‘Do you know how many times your people have tried that since I arrived here?’

‘I DO,’ Byzo replied. ‘WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW EXACTLY HOW MANY?’

‘That will also be a ‘no’,’ Thelema smiled.

‘THIS LOST THING,’ Byzo said. ‘IT WAS I WHO FOUND IT. IT IS SOMETHING THAT YOU WILL WISH ALSO TO FIND, AMBASSADOR. I AM CERTAIN AN ACCOMMODATION CAN BE REACHED THAT WILL NOT BE TOO PAINFUL FOR YOU.’

‘If you tell me what this thing is, I might perhaps be interested,’ the Lady Thelema said. ‘Whether you do is your choice entirely, of course.’

‘IT IS A TIMESHIP,’ Byzo told her. ‘AN ERRANT VESSEL OF THE GREAT HOUSES. AN OBJECT MORE PRECIOUS THAN A HUNDRED SYSTEMS FULL OF SENTIENT WORLDS.’

Thelema pouted. ‘I suppose that might potentially interest my superiors. Do you feel like telling me how you came to find such a thing?’

‘I WAS OBSERVING THE SKEINS OF TIME SURROUNDING A WORLD IN OUR DEMESNE OF INTEREST,’ Byzo explained. ‘THEIR INTRICACY AND CONVOLUTION INCREASES GREATLY INTO THE FUTURE, BUT IN THE PAST THINGS ARE SIMPLER. THERE IS ONE SKEIN THAT REACHES BACK SOME WAY INTO THAT PAST, INTO THE HISTORY OF A PRIOR PLANETARY CIVILISATION. THERE THE THREAD WEAVES ITSELF INTO THE WORLD AND VANISHES FROM VIEW.’

A thunderous growl came from her Lord’s throat, far above her, and Byzo shuddered inwardly. The penalties if Baphomet felt she had given away enough information to locate the ship without their aid were too dire to be considered. Over the aeons of their existence, their people had become experts in such incentives.

Her visage betrayed no sign of discomposure as she continued: ‘TO BEACH ITSELF ON SUCH A WORLD, THE TIMESHIP MUST HAVE FAILED. WE KNOW THAT THE GREAT HOUSES’ STANDARD PROCEDURE WOULD BE EXTRACTION AND RETRIEVAL. THE TECHNOLOGY IS TOO VALUABLE BY FAR TO FALL INTO YOUR ENEMY’S HANDS, AND THE METAGENIC FIELD FROM SUCH A FAULTY VESSEL COULD RESHAPE ENTIRE SPECIES.’ It could do it considerably faster than her people were able to, as well. It was the secret behind such technology that Baphomet was hoping to extract, one way or another, from Thelema. ‘NO RECOVERY VESSEL’S SKEIN IS VISIBLE. YOU NEED THE KNOWLEDGE WE CAN PROVIDE, AMBASSADOR.’

Thelema clicked her tongue. ‘Well, this is a pity. I’ve rather enjoyed my posting here. At least I can be fairly sure the two of you won’t have told anyone else. You people are as stingy with information between yourselves as you are with outsiders.’

Byzo frowned. ‘WHAT ARE YOU JABBERING ABOUT?’

‘Well, I could tell you,’ Thelema said cheerily. ‘But then I’d have to kill you *twice*.’

Nearby, a crescent moon fell with a ground-shattering clang, followed by two more. The iron landscape continued to shake as Prince Baphomet leaned forward on his throne and roared, **'WILL YOU THREATEN ME, MICROBE?'**

'I'll give it a try,' the Ambassador called up to him. Nonchalantly, with one hand, she picked from the pocket of her robes a wooden-handled handbell. She gave it an experimental jingle as, from another pocket, she pulled an ancient-looking leatherbound book.

She opened it and riffled through the pages as, with a third hand, she produced a lit candle in a holder.

At the beginning of this conversation, the Lady Thelema had only had the one pair of hands. Whatever this creature was, it was not an Ambassador of the Great Houses.

It grinned. 'Well, then. Shall we continue?'

R3

The young mangrove walked, placing one stem in front of another, across the miles between its native bayou and the nearest root of the worldtree. There it paused, to drink in one final infusion of water and nutrients from the soil of its native moon – though in these uplands the soil was dry and saltless for its tastes – then it began to ascend the twining, knotted rootwood towards the great trunk.

The mangrove had one of those annoying, ticklish spiders in the small of its bark. Scratching didn't seem to get rid of it, and there were no bodies of water on the worldtree for the mangrove to immerse itself in. *Oh well*, the mangrove, who was generally of a sunny disposition, told its eight-legged companion, *I suppose you're along for the ride.* It wished the little creature joy of it.

Walking the great gnarled highways of the worldtree's trunk, it met a great many other travellers. Other mangroves, black, red and white, from its own swampy moon crossed paths with pretty birches and stately maples from the temperate planet above, and with more exotic visitors – firs and hemlocks, palms and araucarias – from the other planets of the Greenworld.

At the base of one vast branch it befriended a giant sequoia, many times larger than any tree the mangrove had met before, save obviously the worldtree itself. The sequoia's ancestors were of the Forest of Yosemite, and it lived on the fourth planet from the Greenworld's sun. It had been here on the fifth planetary complex to consult the heartwoods, after the third planet's own had suffered memory loss in the most recent tunguska.

The mangrove quivered when told this. At home in its little bayou it had been

safe from the mysterious celestial events, which for reasons yet to be established – as so far applied to almost everything about the tunguskas – generally afflicted only the heartwoods where the Greenworld's collective memories resided.

Sensing the little tree's nervousness, the sequoia calmed it by recommending the view from the branch, which it had just climbed. The mangrove took its advice and spent an additional fortnight ascending to the edge of the worldtree's leaf-cover, to admire the view across the rest of the system.

The sky was blue in all directions, as far as the mangrove could see. Back along the worldtrunk the way it had come, the sun was setting over the mangrove's little moon, muting the vivid greens of its marshes and everglades to olive and teal. Ahead, the fifth planet was in full sunlight, mottled all over with shades of emerald and mint, khaki and sage. Great intertwining strands of road-wide ivy and liana spread out from the continent-sized canopy all around, tangling with those of the other worldtrees across the whole of the Greenworld.

The trees' domain occupied a full stellar system, from the sparse yuccas, ironwoods and eucalypts basking on the near-stellar asteroids to the great taigas of pine, spruce and larch spread through the outermost cometesimal clouds. No fewer than sixteen planets and their attendant satellites had been fully forested, by every species of shrub, tree and bush brought forth by the biosphere of the long-distant, long-vanished Earth. They basked in the modulated warmth of their adoptive father, drinking in moisture from the soil of their surrogate mothers. Comets pollinated them.

The same ancient (and hugely expensive) systemic manipulation that artificially managed the Greenworld's temperature range, expanding the Goldilocks Zone to almost the entire breadth of the system, had also created a stable atmospheric accretion disc. Oxygen and carbon dioxide, nitrogen and water vapour, airborne seeds and pollen, were exchanged constantly in the winds between the planets.

The Greenworld breathed. Its lungs were worlds, and its breath was the creaking of branches and the shiver of leaves.

The mangrove continued its climb in the same direction, descending now, towards the planet that had been above and was now increasingly beneath. When it reached the primary root system, it bade goodbye to the worldtree and struck out along the root towards the planetary heartwoods.

It was a long trek, but the mangrove found it enchanting. On its moon it had been used to crocodiles, snakes, and many different birds and fish – *and spiders, of course*, it acknowledged wryly to its passenger, as once again a tickling disturbed its bark – but nothing like the fauna here. The humus underroot held worms and beetles, and through the undergrowth trundled moles and hedgehogs, even the

occasional badger. The branches of the trees held songbirds in their hundreds, some of which came to settle on the mangrove as it walked. No animal showed the slightest alarm at the passing of the mangrove, a tree so alien to their own habitat.

For an uncharitable moment the mangrove hoped that one of the birds would eat the spider, but as they flew away it felt it once again, spinning a web between two twigs in its crown.

Soon it came upon deer, cropping back the leaves of some of the sleeping trees to allow new growth. The mangrove offered one a twig, but it sniffed its salty leaves and tripped away. That night the mangrove heard the distant howling of a pack of wolves, there to keep the deer from flourishing too prolifically.

The mangrove was part of a minority, one which in other societies might have been an elite, but one whose members cared passionately for their less gifted kindred. One in every five hundred of the Greenworld's trees, perhaps, awoke during its lifetime to sentience and mobility; the rest continued, like their cousins and ancestors, to slumber and remember. The glades of home were tended by this mangrove's cousin, one of the Order of Surgeons, whose loving kinship with their charges made them the best arboriculturists the cosmos had produced, but who would never have dreamt of taking their skills beyond the Greenworld system.

No other sentience was permitted within the Greenworld's heliosphere. Nobody walked the Greenworld's soil but trees.

The mangrove felt the spider busy among its leaves as it approached the heartwoods. It paused one more, as it had done so many times since leaving the worldtree root, to soak up moisture from this alien soil. It gazed on the strange beauty of the oak and ash and poplar, so different from the halophytes of home.

Soon a lissom hazel crowned with mistletoe emerged from the heartwoods, to guide the mangrove into their centre. They passed small groves and spinneys of historians, folklorists and genealogists clustered around particular trees, seeking the knowledge etched deep within their oldest rings.

The Greenwood kept its memories well. Until the tunguskas came, its wisdom had been among the most secure in the cosmos. Many things which were altogether forgotten elsewhere were still remembered by the trees.

The hazel conveyed it to the stand of aspen whose memories it sought, and left it to commune with them.

Awed at the majesty it faced, the mangrove quailed, but quickly hardened its resolve. The heartwoods' wisdom was for all the trees of the Greenwood, no matter how young or small or far-flung.

Wise ones, it asked the aspens with a deep bough, *I come seeking knowledge.*

Trillennia ago, my distant Earthborn ancestors dwelt on an isle of the Pacific Ocean, before they were wiped from its surface by the actions of human beings. For years we survived only in the botanical prison at Kew.

I want to learn more of this genocide, it told them. *I want to know what is remembered of the history of humans on Queen Anne Island.*

Then it settled raptly back, waiting as the aspens released the history in pheromones, to be absorbed through the mangrove's leaves.

Moments later, the sky above its head exploded with fire, and the mangrove, the aspens and tens of thousands of trees for hundreds of miles around were flattened with the force of some vicious device of war, leaving nothing but a burning plain of smoke and firewood.

The deer and wolves and earthworm and beetles perished with them. The spider was already gone.

L4

'Yeah, I remember when Professor Maddox lost it. I took Marine Biology with her in my sophomore year. Her specialty was cephalopods – squid and octopus and cuttlefish and all those tentacle-y things. She couldn't get enough of them tentacles, baby.

'She liked the octopuses especially. She'd talk about how some octopuses would break off a tentacle full of sperm for mating, and how they could squeeze through tiny gaps, and learn to unscrew jars and solve mazes and all kinds of shit. The way she told it, they were so intelligent they basically qualified for human rights.

'Hey – I hope you don't mind, but I'm recording this. On my cellphone, see? It's just that… Maddox isn't the only person on campus who's gone missing. Over the last year there've been students who've, like, unexpectedly quit their courses or gone home or broken up with their boyfriends and now they can't find them anywhere. And all of them knew Professor Maddox, so… no offence, it's just a precaution. I mean, you're recording too, yeah?

'OK.

'So, yeah. Maddie knew her shit all right, she could talk for hours about any kind of cephalopod you could name, but she knew we particularly liked hearing about the weird ones. The ones that are weird even for sea-creatures with tentacles, I mean. Giant squid she told us about, and the colossal squid that's even bigger. Vampire squid were one of her favourites too. And the dumbo octopus, the deep-sea kind with the big flaps that look like ears. Anything that was out of the ordinary, even for a fucking cephalopod.

‘She was a giant geek, really – a colossal geek – but it made the classes interesting. More than she had to, anyway, and that’s why we all liked her. The seniors who’d been on field trips with her came back filled up with enthusiasm about what was basically sushi that hadn’t been cooked yet.

‘Anyway.

‘That day in her lecture, she was talking about the mimic octopus. You may have heard of them – they’re the ones that shape their tentacles to make themselves look like different animals? They imitate crabs and lionfish and flatfish and jellyfish, and… well, Loads of other things. They can change their colour too – well, most cephalopods can. They use chromatophores, which are little dots of pigment they can expand or shrink, like biological pixels.

‘Yeah? Well, OK, maybe. Maybe Maddie made us all into colossal geeks.

‘You see, the mimic octopus’s Latin name is *Thaumoctopus mimicus*. ‘Thaumoctopus’ means ‘magic octopus’, and ‘mimicus’ obviously means ‘mimic’.

‘Thing is, what Maddox had written up on the whiteboard when she started the session was *Thaumoctopus memeticus*, and there’s no such species. There’s only one kind of *Thaumoctopus*, and that’s *mimicus*.

‘I saw her teaching assistant looking at it kind of nervously, but he didn’t correct her.

‘She seemed kind of out of it that day – a bit subdued. Her lecturing was lacklustre, not nearly so animated as she normally was. I know I zoned out a bit. So I guess it took some of us a while to notice that she’d gone off-script.

‘The first I knew was when her TA interrupted. He said, ‘I don’t think that can be right, Professor. I’m pretty sure they can’t take the shape of seabirds. Or frogs, either. When would they see a frog?’

‘And that’s when Maddox lost it. She started raving about this new species she’d discovered, the memetic octopus. Said it could take on any form in the observer’s mind, with 100% mimicry. The octopus approximated it, and the viewer’s perceptions did the rest.

‘Some smart-ass asked, ‘So how did you discover it, Professor? And how do you know it’s an octopus?’ She didn’t answer that.

‘She said they not only took on the appearance, but the behaviour too – that’s true of the mimic octopus, by the way. You’re not going to fool anyone looking like a sole if you’re still swimming like an octopus.

‘She said that meant… well, yeah. That they could take on human form, too, and human behaviour. That you could *talk* to them.

‘People had started walking out already, obviously, figuring Maddie was likely to be locked away before she could give them the credit for the course. The rest of

us were just sitting there, stunned and upset.

'Like I say, everyone could see she'd gone completely batshit. And that was *before* she started talking about how these octopuses existed in four dimensions, and could reach through time, and supplement their mimicking ability with extra tentacles from their past and future selves, and how the tentacles were fractal and all kinds of crazy shit.

'By that time nearly everyone had gone, and the TA was on the phone to the campus medics. And as I stood up to go, she looked right at me. And she said, 'When I say they can imitate anything, Bobby, I don't just mean organisms. Memetic, you see? Sometimes they turn themselves into *ideas*.'

'And that's the last time I saw her.

'They said she went into the restrooms, while the medic was on the way over, and she never came out. They found her clothes, her cellphone, her laptop, all sitting in the cubicle splashed with water. The lid had been taken off the cistern and it was full of… well, ink.

'An octopus can squeeze its whole body down a narrow pipe, provided there's room for just one of its tentacles. And no, I don't know how that works either, but a lot of them escape from aquariums that way.

'I know, it sounds like an urban legend, one of those stories from Creepypasta or wherever. But the TA saw it, and so did the medic and the security guy they called. Maybe it will become a legend now. But it's what happened here.

'And that's it. You can print it or not, it's your choice. I doubt your readers will believe you, but hey, what do I know about journalism? Maybe you can sell it to the *National Enquirer*. But I know what I know, even if I don't understand it, and nobody's going to take that away from me.

'Hey, I think you've got something on your chin. I mean your – oh shit, what's happened to your teeth? What's happening – my God, your *face!*

'Oh, holy shit! Oh, Christ! *Somebody help me!*'

R4

A flameproof aircraft flew Héloïse d'Argenteuil and her crew south across the equator. She watched grimly as the First City receded – its gleaming buildings on their islands surmounted by monorails and swarmed about with aircars – and remembered Abelard, languishing in the tyrant's cells, desperately awaiting her return.

Héloïse's crew were green-skinned, bald and beetle-browed, personally selected for this mission by their dome-headed tyrant. South of the flame-barrier their craft was attacked by bat-winged, dark-skinned men, towing graceful four-armed

slaves with feathery membrane wings in gossamer chains, and they were forced to put down near the titanic folly that was the ruin of the White Globe.

They could expect much more of that, Héloïse knew. In the First City she'd been relatively protected, but out here every species was at the throats of every other, or whatever they might have instead of throats. (The only exception being the people of the seven sexes, whose private lives kept them far too busy for warfare.)

They broke the aircraft down into its prefabricated components, then carried them through the swamplands to the shores of the great southern ocean. Although their capital itself was built in a lagoon, the heat and humidity of these southern swamps unsettled Héloïse's crew and made their skins itch. Impatiently she urged them onward, and emotionlessly they complied.

In the foetid coastal wetlands they captured one of the swamp dragons: a huge amphibious monster with many eyestalks, and manipulating tendrils above its sturdy forelegs. It whistled plaintive fluting notes until one of Héloïse's crew gave it a translation device, a shiny metal box with a speaker grille, and insisted it take them to the floating islands.

With brisk, logical efficiency Héloïse's team assembled a boat from the components of the aircraft. As they cast off they came under attack from a black, grinning cone, mounted on innumerable cilia and boasting two enormous clawed arms, which launched ray-like flying creatures through the air at them. Héloïse's allies told her they were mind-control devices, and blasted them out of the air with their ray-guns. The beast retreated into the swampy forests, still leering horribly.

The dragon – which had inexplicably requested that they call it 'Sir Kingsley Amis' – swam alongside them, on a course taking them south-south-west from the fixed land.

It was a strange time in the history of this world, Héloïse knew.

The strangest thing of all being that it now *had* a history. Thirty orbits of the sun ago that had not been true, unless you ascribed to it the history of how it had been perceived in the culture, literature and mythology of its near neighbour. Although arguably that was all it had now, too.

Because, thirty local years ago, had come the Celestis, and the Metafictional Barrage. And now, above the permanent cloud-cover, a flotilla of artificial satellites encircled the planet, each one containing a world-warping mechanism fuelled by a different work of literature or entertainment from the next world out from the sun.

Each fiction bore its own freight of memory, so that subjectively each of the

planet's newborn civilisations found itself, suddenly and indignantly, sharing its world with a heterogeneous horde of alien strangers. Some tried to come to a new kind of accommodation: most elected to fight. And so the planet had become a roiling turmoil of feuding legends: dry political allegories warring with muscular boys' comics, astounding science-fiction adventures slugging it out with medieval devotional literature.

Héloïse herself was here because one romantically-inclined poet, born a century after her death, had decided that this sphere of heaven must be a paradise for resurrected lovers: he had not even mentioned her or Peter Abelard, but the Celestis' machines were capable of extrapolation. And it seemed history had remembered the two of them as devoted to one another.

Héloïse's memory was rather different – although how that could be, given that she herself was presumably a creation of those same machines, continued to baffle her. On Earth she had been Abelard's pupil – no callow girl, certainly, and with some decidedly unconventional views of her own, but nonetheless someone over whom he stood in authority. He had violated the trust of that relationship: with her consent, to be sure, but also with a persistence that did him little credit as a man of God.

Their affair had been passionate, but it had been brief – and if Abelard had suffered the more physically, during and after the procedure her uncle and his thugs had carried out to prevent him offending in such a way again; still he had gone on to live an honoured life as a celebrated scholar and divine, while Héloïse had been separated from their infant son Astrolabus and incarcerated in the nunnery at Argenteuil, despite her entire lack of calling to such a discipline.

Yet it seemed Héloïse had no more authority to argue with the judgement of history than with Abelard himself, who once had insisted on her cloistered life, and who now insisted on their honouring the sentimental recollection of later generations.

The purpose of the Celestis's breathtakingly high-handed reconstruction of this world – or so the green-skinned tyrant had assured Héloïse, his great head lolling as he sat above her on his floating throne – had been as a strategic gambit in some distant War, of whose history he could glean only fragments. The celestial beings had made the planet a warzone to protect a cache of vital data which they had secreted somewhere on the surface. The local war didn't even reflect any affiliation to the various heavenly factions: it was just there to make the Celestis's data more difficult to get at.

It seemed, though, that some of those factions were keen to access it anyway. Certainly the representatives of the Great Houses who had arrived in the First City

were strenuously determined to make its inaccessibility the tyrant's problem, not theirs. And he had magnanimously made it Héloïse's.

So here she was, on her way to bargain with the protectors of the cache – the planet's self-styled (or, as they believed, God-appointed) King and Queen whose dominions in practice extended little further than the otherwise uninhabited reef of floating mats of vegetation they called home.

And there was Peter Abelard – who loved her, after all, in his own myopic way, and whom she had once fancied herself in love with, though even then she'd had no truck with his idea of marriage, calling it little more than church-approved whoredom – imprisoned in the First City's polished cells, the tyrant's surety against her successful return.

'You'll have enormous trouble persuading them, you know,' Sir Kingsley Amis assured her through his translator as he swam, confident and fluid, through the malachite-green sea. 'They believe they were appointed to this task of theirs by God.'

'I know,' said Héloïse. 'I used to be an abbess.' It had been her only recourse at Argenteuil: to use the talents she had to reach the top of the local power structure. 'That's why I was… selected.'

The dragon gave a bubbling laugh. 'I thought I recognised your name. But what's an abbess, compared to God? Spiritual advice won't cut it, I'm afraid. Your best bet is to tempt them to fall.'

'Their God is false,' snapped Héloïse. 'The Celestis are impostor deities. I can prove that to them, if they'll listen.'

On their second day at sea they were again attacked, by the triple-sexed swordfish who inhabited the coral cities of the ocean bottom. They corkscrewed through the sea, their three flexible limbs wielding sophisticated weapons, and their pointed snouts could skewer a man at the gunwales and drag him beneath the waves. Héloïse's party lost five of its number before one of them, as he died, set off a voltage-mine and stunned every sea creature within a kilometre. Sir Kingsley was knocked unconscious too, of course, and awoke with great indignation to see Héloïse's team dispatching their comatose assailants with bacterial guns.

'As far as we can tell, we are the superior type,' one of them explained, as if that were a complete justification.

On the third day they sighted the vegetation rafts. The flexible mats resembled nothing so much as a landscape, their upper growths reminiscent of grass and shrubs and trees, riding up and down on the giant swells of the southern ocean, valleys becoming ridges in moments then subsiding again.

They disembarked, and disassembled the boat. Before they set out across the floating islands, at Héloïse's insistence they freed the dragon.

'Why are you even here?' Sir Kingsley asked, peering at her with three of his eyes as he prepared for the long swim back to his swamp. 'You don't share the values of these creatures. I wouldn't have thought you'd want to help their ruler.'

'They have my… friend,' Héloïse told it, hoping that the creature would not realise who she meant, and hating herself the more for hoping it.

They took back the dragon's translator device. It waved its tendrils in farewell, then swam away north-north-eastwards.

Héloïse's party advanced warily into the undulating landscape, gradually adjusting to the need to lean and rock in regular, slow rhythms as they walked. The islands themselves were small, perhaps the size of a village of Héloïse's time, but they clustered, leaving narrow channels of ocean at their closest points, for the party to jump across like rivers.

Before sunset, they met another landing-party, this time from one of the female-separatist civilisations. These were all so similar that Héloïse had never learned to distinguish between them: the women wore abbreviated skirts and tunics with odd, revealing slashes cut into them, but that didn't narrow the field much. They eyed up Héloïse's all-male crew with disdain, then turned their attention to her, demanding a parley.

Itching at the delay, Héloïse agreed.

To her irritation (but no great surprise) the warrior-women were seeking the data-cache as well. 'Did your delegation tell you they were speaking for all the Great Houses?' Their leader, Zaleena, laughed scornfully. 'Ours represent House Tracolix alone. Other Houses have made representations to the cloud-cities, and with the Azurians on the etheric plane. Each one is desperate to get its hands on the cache before the others do. Information about their Enemy is like uranium dust to them.'

Héloïse sighed. Their parties must eventually decide between them who would keep the cache, but she was confident that her team's weapons would give them the upper hand. For the moment, though, they were in no direct conflict, and it would have been inelegant to go directly from a parley to a ray-gun battle.

They agreed a truce, for now, and proceeded together towards the centre of the floating islands, where the King and Queen were believed to reside. As they camped that night the women expressed elaborate disgust at the apparent maleness of their new companions – deeply confusing Héloïse's crew, whose species had transcended sex many fictional millennia before.

The next day they saw a large green creature whirling across the landscaped

waves towards them, like a stone skimmed from some distant shore. It slowed to a halt when it saw them, and revealed itself as a being perhaps of starfish ancestry: five-legged with tough hooves, its upper hide bearing five manipulating tentacles and five eyestalks.

'You're on a hiding to nothing, ladies,' its nearest mouth told them. 'The cache is gone.'

'You have it?' Zaleena demanded. 'Then we will fight, and see who has it afterwards.'

The creature's eyes swept lasciviously up and down her curves. 'Oh, I could fight you, doll-face,' it said. 'I got martial arts moves like you wouldn't believe. But there's no percentage in it. The royals lost the loot before I even got there. House Xianthellipse are gonna be real disappointed.'

'They lost it?' Héloïse asked. 'In what sense 'lost'?'

Three of the being's tentacles performed an expressive shrug. 'King says the Queen can't have been watching it properly. *She* says he distracted her at a crucial moment – take that how you will.' It waggled its eyestalks suggestively.

'Who stole it, then?' Zaleena insisted.

'See, that's where it gets interesting,' said the pentapod. 'First she says a swamp-dragon, then a swordfish, then one of those crystal-worshipping men-lizards with the squiggly chests. The one thing she's sure of is it had tentacles,' it explained, waving its own. 'The King thinks it was a nest of serpents. What you gonna do? The guy has serpents on the brain.'

It left them with a 'Later, ladies,' and spun away at speed across the sinusoidal landscape.

Héloïse said to Zaleena, 'The creature might be lying. We must go on.'

'Of course,' Zaleena agreed haughtily. 'But it is not. We will find the cache gone.'

'I know,' said Héloïse, resuming the march. She ground her teeth, imagining the tyrant's response to her failure. '*Damn* Peter Abelard.'

'You do this for a man?' Zaleena was keeping up with her, with long, powerful strides. 'You need no man. Our missions have failed, it is true, and we may suffer… but now the Great Houses have no reason to remain. They will leave us to our wars. We need women of your strength and courage, Earthwoman. Return with us to our city. Live among us.'

Héloïse raised her eyebrows. 'That's a generous offer.'

She was surprised to find the idea of living among women again rather appealing, after the thirty local years she'd lived with Abelard… not to mention the centuries of remembered, if wholly imaginary, eternity preceding them. Being

forced into a convent against her will was one thing; signing up voluntarily with a matriarchal society would be rather another.

'Join us, Earthwoman,' Zaleena said again. 'Become our blood-sister. Learn the cunning ways we have devised to entertain ourselves without men.'

The amazon's proposal was becoming more tempting with every moment. But… there was Abelard, imprisoned in a cell in the First City. Could she really abandon him in his hour of need? Whatever his effect on her life, both here and on Earth, she surely owed him better than that. But what good would it be for her to return empty-handed, to join him in the tyrant's prison?

'Of course,' said Zaleena thoughtfully, 'if, after a while, you should still wish it… once we have come to know and trust each other… we could unite the women of this world, and lead the greatest army it has ever seen in storming the green men's citadel and overthrowing their despot. What would you say to that, Earthwoman?'

And Héloïse smiled.

Suckers

A couple of hours later Cousin Braquemard has a lengthy list of things that irritate her about Cousin Mace. The headline item is the fact that, while the Cousin is by far the most gifted psychometrist Braquemard has met, he's also one of the worst storytellers she's ever heard. Eight accounts' worth of 'Oh, apparently they reckon the cat did it, though,' and 'And now she's got a candle too – oh, except hang on…,' on Mace's part, coupled with uncharacteristically patient questioning on Braquemard's, have left her with some seriously interesting intel and a strong urge to bite chunks out of the concrete walls.

There's no question that this is useful stuff, though. 'Father Stendec was right,' she says now. 'This is the mother of all cryptids. Not just a hidden animal – one that aggressively keeps its existence a secret.'

Mace looks abstracted, still toying with the chrome box that's apparently a Venusian translator. 'Unless it's all rubbish,' he says. 'I told you I make stuff up. It normally turns out to be true. Not always.'

But Braquemard is still thinking things through. 'They evolved under the timeship's influence, after it crashed on Cretaceous Earth. In terms of recorded human history, they've been around at least 65 million years. Plenty of time for them to have developed the abilities Professor Maddox described. The Great Houses are only ten million years old, and they can do most of that stuff, or their technology can.'

‘And these ones use it to destroy all the records of themselves,’ Mace says, frowning at the phone now.

‘Like the recording the student made,’ Braquemard agrees. ‘And the student. And the heartwoods, and the bestiary, and the DVD. That’s obviously the constant factor here.’

Maddox herself doesn’t quite fit with that, of course, if you assume she really was a *T. memeticus* – she was telling the world about the cryptids’ existence, not covering it up. Unless she was some kind of dissident, Braquemard thinks. More likely she was human all along, and they just disposed of the body more thoroughly than they did Dr Smallcoate’s.

‘So how does the Venus bit fit in then?’ Mace wonders ponderously. ‘That woman told that other woman the Great Houses wanted data about their Enemy. *They* wouldn’t be bothered with some cryptid.’

There’s something nagging at Cousin Braquemard as well. ‘But what are those even doing here?’ she wonders aloud, staring at the eight objects on the table. ‘65 million years and they never heard of psychometry? *Those* are records of their existence.’

Her eyes widen, as the import of what Mace just said sinks in. ‘Oh, *shit*,’ she breathes.

Because there’s a third possibility about Professor Maddox. If she was correct, and these creatures can become anything, even an idea… and if that idea can invade someone’s mind, as ideas do… then does the person, too, become just another disguise for the idea within? A disguise that it can shrug off if it chooses?

‘Mace!’ she shouts. ‘We have to get out of here!’

But the psychometrist is staring at the table, encountering his own epiphany of horror.

On the bar table before Cousin Mace, the objects are rearranging themselves. As both Cousins watch, the earpieces of Dr Smallcoate’s glasses uncurl, and the lenses thicken and elongate, losing their transparency. The smooth surface of Bobby’s phone puckers and coarsens, the cracks closing up invisibly, as it becomes rounder and narrower and its blackness greys across. George Stillsome’s hat is uncoiling, like a child’s clay pot coming apart. The other items are undergoing their own metamorphoses…

…until eight independent tentacles squirm on the tabletop, tapering to sixteen tips.

Meanwhile Mace’s ears are unfurling like the spectacles. His hair is flattening, losing its colour, while his fingers elongate and begin to merge. Flushes of various colours – red, green, black, transparent glass – chase one another across his skin.

His legs flop up onto the table, footless now, bending in ways they couldn't possibly; his arms writhe like terrified snakes.

His look of horror, just before his face comes apart in a coiling mass of muscle and suckers, tells Cousin Braquemard that he wasn't expecting this at all.

The creature that used (though probably not in a very helpful sense) to be Cousin Mace lolls forward onto the table, arms still working the air. All four limbs stretch out, each one lengthening and bifurcating, as the tentacles on the table stretch up to meet and merge with them.

For a moment, mockingly and effortlessly, it contorts itself into alternative shapes – a cat, a spider, a dragon, a human brain – blushing with clouds of colour like a dying television.

Then it is what it is, and staring at her out of two inhuman eyes. There's an intense smell of brine.

And finally she thinks to scream, as all eight of its tentacles lash forward and stick onto her face.

As it begins to suffocate her, she thinks: now *Thaumoctopus memeticus* has access to the Stacks of the Eleven-Day Empire. Harder to reach than the Collection of Necessary Secrets, more difficult to destroy at a distance than the heartwoods of the Greenworld – but they got in here in the end. They have a free hand – as many hands as they want, in fact – to blot all Faction Paradox's records, erase its data, steal its precious specimens.

And yet – she realises before she sinks into the inky darkness – and yet, after all, Father Stendec ought to be pleased with his Cousins' work today.

After all, for the first time the Stacks now include a specimen of the Enemy.

Pre-narrative Briefing F

Even in war- time - perhaps especially in war time - comedy and humour, those things the Great Houses have never hitherto successfully counted among their accomplishments, retain a peculiar importance to the Humanic Cultures (I do not accept the prejorative 'lesser' prefix, even if some humans have begun to ironically or defiantly reclaim it.). Examples of this in official House schematic materials are minimal, but occasionally a briefing would offer something amusing amid its horror, or its horrors would themselves be turned into a jest.

Captain Robert Scarratt, Rtd, Deceased.

The Short Briefing Sergeant's Tale

So we'd got off on the wrong foot, so much was clear.

The Sergeant-instructor was angry with us, spitting practically with rage, all five foot of him a-quiver. He wore an antique uniform of the kind I associated with grainy old film footage of the Riots back at War's Start – all scarlet, with white piping. He didn't think much of our Wave, and he intended to say so…

'I have heard a great deal from the Fourth Wave troops, about 'resilience', about 'adaptability', about 'indestructability'. I have even heard a good deal of loose talk about one Great House trooper being worth a dozen of the Enemy. Careless gossip! Rumour and scuttlebutt! As you will hear this is a dangerous misunderstanding of the scales involved.'

He levered himself up onto the trainer-desk, buttocks spread across the flat-screens, his little legs barely a third of the way to the ground. Had he been made that way deliberately, we wondered – or at least one of our cohort did, for I heard him whisper it in wave-speak, in closemouth Haus-tongue. Was it Argelax, or Timenon? It didn't really matter what nickname I knew the whisperer by. Perhaps there'd just been a lack of material when the breeding engines birthed his wave – or could he be old enough to have survived from before that, when Great House children were spun like a cottage industry, on the old gene-weaving frames?

'None of you snivelling, wet out of the vat – (here a very rude word indeed) – have the least idea about 'resilience', the first conception of 'adaptability', and none of you know the meaning of the word 'indestructability'.

We rather felt we did. By that time we'd already been tested – not in battle, nor at one of the Time-fronts – but in virtualities, and in test conditions in Grey Time. We weren't the high heroes of the first cohorts of our Wave, not yet, we weren't Scarrretts, Milikins, or Vonsoladors. We'd not had a chance to seize a War-Title in the lesser species styles that so many of the great Captains flaunted: The Buckaroo, Reaver,Razorette, and The Void. Chances are, we each had one in mind - didn't they used to say every private has a field-marshal's baton in his knapsack? I rather fancied styling myself The Conquistador. I intended to cut a dash. We were all very young. This I suspected was what the Sergeant found most galling about us. Not just our surprise when we'd first seen him, vulgar though that had been.

'I'm here to brief you. By the time you leave this class-simulation you will be aware of the range of environments in which you may encounter enemy units. These include mountain tops up to seventy thousand units over basal level, deep ocean trenches, tropical rain-forests, volcanic vents, and environments ranging from within one temperature unit of the absolute limits for normal entropy

matter, to upwards of one and a half times the boiling point of hydrogen oxide at standard atmospheric pressures. They can be found wherever life clings.

‘Every world that has evolved life, evolves this life. It is so simple that it is implied in the Hausanthropic equations that provide for aesthetically pleasing lesser species. Shockingly their being is equally implied by our existence, also. They are built deep into the universe. They cannot be dug out from the roots of the Great Houses, for they first appear millions of years before the ‘now’ point of the protocols of linearity, and their ubiquity and ineradicability were not realised when the web was newly anchored and still flexible. By ‘now’, after the long ages of peaceful time, when so much of history has been fixed by its relationship with our own observers, they are present nearly everywhere, and nearly everywhen.’

I was inclined to disbelief, although I supposed the assertion might explain a lot; we’ve all wondered why the Enemy’s homeworld cannot be removed from the Spiral Politic in one surgical piece of weaponised temporal engineering. There are species known that have more than one origin, because of the sheer likelihood that they would originate*somewhere*, and some have fought civil wars between themselves, or assimilated their analogues : but a species so*evolutionarily obvious*that it began everywhere? That would be impossible to carve out of space and time without resorting to Reality Weaponry on such a scale that only fragments of the cosmic-all would remain.

‘Furthermore and worse, once evolved the Enemy is essentially indestructible. Worlds where this emergent form exists have been subject to local supernovae events, medium distance gamma-ray bursts, large asteroid impacts, and grazing stellar collisions without the extinction of Enemy-kind. A single member of this species, can be frozen, irradiated and left in a vacuum. It can subsist without food or water for thirty years, and still revive from dormancy, rehydrate, and be able to continue. It can feed, progress, and self-inseminate and reproduce itself within fourteen standard days.

‘Oh yes, I know what you’re thinking.*Wecan* adapt ourselves to be extremophilic. *Wecan* reconstruct ourselves to thrive in any lethal environment. So we can. But we cannot adapt ourselves to all of them at once. They are not adapted to any one lethality: they endure them all.’

We must have looked expectantly at the big screen behind him, but it still showed only a pearly grey void.

‘You’d like to see a picture! I’m sure you would, but this is why we have been so cautious about actually entering into a full and frank discussion of the physical form of the Enemy.

They are omnipresent, they are the hardiest race known: they form a massive collective psyche existing in a mental structure comprising approximately a septillion, septillion entities in present basal-time. Their debundled processing capacity is such that they may be running a set of nested simulations of our reality, as a tactical aide in real time, on only one third of their mindscape. Their noo-sphere is at least equal to our own – and our war-strategists have confirmed from the first that when their thoughts reach maximum observer criticality: when they are more integral, more present in space-time than we (a moment we can foresee but not predict strategically), the fixed points that define history will be theirs not ours and we will be not only defeated, but irrelevant. Perhaps worse than irrelevant: for it is unclear if*their*world view includes us at all. One of the worser-case scenarios is that despite the forces that they have set in motion*they may not be conscious at all*, as we understand the term. The whole war on our terms may be no more than a reflex to them. A shrug.'

'They are the greatest danger we have ever faced. On a local scale they seemingly coerce and manipulate representatives from many other species, and yet…and yet. We have not yet found a way of talking of them that conveys that. Almost none of you will be able to leave here with an appropriate conception of the threat they pose simply because of one further fact about them.

If only they were giant **[term censored during YOUR rebuild for YOUR safety]** . If only they were scorpion-men or even giant mutated ant-things. If only they were something we could look in the eye, and fight upon a level playing field. If they were Leviathans or Cyclopean Monstrosities, we would shout out our defiance. We would be punching up.'

His voice cracked

'They are half a millimetre long. (That's 0.02 inches or 19.69 thou, for those of you trained for other theatres of the war, and using different basal language pools). They are short and plump and move slowly on eight podgy legs. They trigger no sense of threat as they slowly crop the lichen or moss on which they feed.

They have a million names, on a million worlds: all ludicrous: they're called Tardigrades, or water bears, space bears, or moss-piglets, flec-mites, teeneylies, or weelocks. Each one is built of only 40,000 cells, and yet their brain supports a third lobe that resonates underneath the spaces we know, and binds them into a superorganism beyond our own intelligentsia. One lobe to do all they need to live, one lobe to bind them, one lobe to do what we cannot understand.

The fox knows many things, the mystics of a distant world say, but the tortoise knows one great thing. The Tardigrades are many things, but they think one great

thing – and we do not understand it. We have isolated a world of the creatures in timestop, and built engines to replicate their brains neuron by neuron, but we can decipher only the chanting that they raise incessantly. They are running logomantic equations – transference calculus, the mathematics that reweaves space-time: each unit a counting array in a matrix that stretches across space and time. Are they opening portal to other plenums? Are they singing the long death of stars? Do they even*know*what they are singing into being?

Irrespective of what they know, we do not know. And such ignorance does not become us.*We*anchored the web, we were there – if not when all things were made, at least five picoseconds later. We sculpted the ylem, we devised the lifecycle of stars – and we left in the margins of our calculated universe, something that calculates what we do not fathom, and from the margins slowly, so slowly, it crept out over all.

Are they 'the Enemy' – or are they a tool the Enemy is using, a biological weapon? Are they the lever by which the Enemy will invert the worlds, and bring down our structured domain – to be replaced with something other? Or are they both lever and engineer?

Is the doom of all that is mapped out in the crawling of tiny mites: and written into the firing of a septillion, septillion clusters of neurons spread out over infinity?

Think about that, the next time you call someone shorty.'

Bastard! So, was that what? A joke? We didn't dare ask, and he only smiled. Jumped down from the desk and left us here, waiting. Are all these briefings going to be lies? Tell me it was a lie…please….

Pre-narrative Briefing G

The neural-networks were only just beginning on Earth, and already they were learning not only how to be best at something, but how to be best at it in ways that their homo sapiens' constructors could neither predict nor understand. The first neural net to defeat human players at Go was instructed with thousands of hours of human play. Its successor was taught the rules and played itself five million times in three days. It then outplayed its protoype a hundred games to nil, using strategies no human had ever devised.

The neural nets are already being trained in the game of writing.

So far their suggestions are strange, merely common elements re-arranged, patterns of letters and words rather than meaningful sentences. At best advertising slogans and jokes. But there are forms of poetry and narrative as rigourously arranged as any game.

What will the first neural nets that write better than a human compose, and how will we understand them? If humanity has made Dragons, the Piebald Man, and Nosferatu: what Monsters will the writers-yet-to-be concoct?

The Writer's Yearbook 2019.

Subjective Interlock Gamma

Sometimes the screens show dramas, or perhaps reconstructions. I cannot yet tell the difference if there is one. Maybe they're filmed us via recording mechanisms buried in our optic nerves, or by reading out the impulses in our spines. If so sometimes they dub on music and sfx.

They tell me my youngest brother is dead. A war fatality. I feel an immense tiredness which is also like a pressure. A soft unpleasant weight across my shoulders as if something unseen was draped there. Is this grief? It cannot be a reaction to my environment: which while neither comforting nor threatening – being merely clinical – is deliberately (I think nondescriptThe ward is heated to a degree that prevents chills and, the only concession to novelty, a different scent each day is intruded via some mechanism. So far I have recognised: vanilla, lime, curocia, the bitterberries of the wintervine, some sort of wood – balsam? There are others and no regularity to their changes that I can perceive. Rosemary perhaps occurs more often than any of the others. During one of the screens changes though, I realised that the room now smelled of blood.

Subjective Injection Ends.

A Bloody (and Public) Domain

Darkness.

Fade in. The black lessens, crumbles, an Empire sky of temporal red focuses.

EXT: THE SHADOW SPIRE.

Solitary silhouette, a twisted and broken lighthouse made of bone, dripping inky shadow (very Dr. Caligari meets Trying Too Hard). A few Loa, smears of age as twisted as the Spire, swarm the peak like vultures.

Zoom to the tippy top, the lantern room.

INT: THE LANTERN ROOM.

Two men, old on the outside, older inside. One, black linen suit and neon blue tie, matching gloves, spic-and-spanned shoes, a gleaming silver skull snug on his face. The other is a disheveled wraith, frumpled violet robes, and tattered remnants of House regalia. His mask is his own skull, the shadow that serves as his skin peeled back just enough to show the red-stained bone. His eyes, wide and shriveled, look like golf balls. Both Faction Paradox, clearly. The normal one is Gideon, the nightmare is Auteur. Both Godfathers. Auteur is a prisoner in the Shadow Spire, the only one. Gideon comes and goes as he likes.

Angle on: The table. Scattered papers, pens, quills. A chess set, carved from (you guessed it) dry bone and ivory. Auteur is scribbling furiously, writing on three pages at once. Gideon just wants to play chess.

Quick cut: The corner. A phonograph, straight out of Hammer, operating diligently on a shard of glittering sapphire. A voice is speaking, cultured and condescending, thick as ink. They are hearing…

Godfather Morlock's Personal Record, kept on Phonograph

Subject: Vlad III of Wallachia. Known as the Impaler. Also known as a few other things I'm sure, many of them expectedly being rather crude and colorful.

I admit, perhaps to the smug chatter of those who deem themselves my peers, to a certain appreciation for the Gothic aesthetic. One can hardly be particularly satisfied in the Faction unless they're alright with the velvet and the cobwebs, but it was always a source of fancy for me. So, yes, I was always particularly fascinated by Vlad Tepes' role, however brief, in the War. I found it rather charming to think that Count Dracula himself was a part of the 'Heavenly' conflict between Houses and enemies.

I've had the the Impaler's corpse down here for a while, the Faction smuggling it from its grave in history some time ago, but I've only just now been able to get to it. It's very rare I ever have the opportunity to study the biodata of a creature that, even in death, experiences multiple branches of History.

Whenever something is under my scalpel, I cut through its dead flesh and into its entire life. I can dissect the day it was born or hatched, slice away the wet and dripping days of infantile squalor. I can dice the adolescence, quarter the heartbreaks and depressions of adult life. I can cut right through their timeline and follow the trail of blood and gristle to the diverging paths of History.

Life is just as much the steps not taken as it is the ones we take and trip over. Examining the history of my subjects involves tracing through the decaying 'What Ifs' and 'Maybes' and other quantum possibles, withered on the timeline, but not dead.

Vlad Tepes' role in the War is known. The massacre of Targoviste accidently caused Mictlan to touch Earth, there was typical Celestis melodrama, et cetera et cetera. Nothing of the Yssgaroth taint, nothing of Mal'akh involvement, no hint of anything humans would recognize as 'vampirism.'

Of course, under the dissections tools, you can see where Vlad's biodata spirals in multiple directions. A fault of being resurrected by Mal'akh cultists at a later date, according to one strand, or his history tangling with the Incremental Effect, his vampiric persona being made real because so many people took Stoker's novel for gospel.

There's one thread that I find the most interesting. Cutting deep enough, slicing the biodata strands just so, there are… flashes. A woman in a black dress and porcelain skin. Her face is almost a mask, lifeless, with something squirming behind. She's leaning over, whispering.

The name 'Lilith' is carved deep in that thread's foundation. The mother of monsters.

This timeline goes on for quite a while, actually. Past the nineteenth century, past any and all fictional and metafictional events of Dracula reaching London and being slain. He survives, and continues. Builds himself a cozy little empire. Others like him crawl out of the darkness while a brand new breed of vampirism takes hold and, in fact, becomes fashionable. One must consider what an interesting version of Earth that would be. How would the technological and societal shiftings of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been different? Can one imagine vampires in space?

What's most interesting about this timeline is how, following along to a certain date, I found a brigade of timeships. Or at least they looked like timeships, but they were most definitely not from the Homeworld. They embraced the flesh and blood and were proudly organic, with none of the clinical and pristine mathematics of the Ships of the Great Houses.

Perhaps, if I may be so bold, I encountered a fleet of the enemy's, blocking the

timeline of a Dracula who never truly perished?

The date that the brigade protected was, interestingly, the same date as the standard Earth timeline's Ghost Po-Po-Po-Po-Po-Po-Po-

Cut away: The phonograph stutters, then coughs, and Auteur coughs with it.

Focus on Gideon as he speaks. He's as cultured and condescending as Morlock (but his voice is damp with gin). 'I hesitate to think of what he'd do to me, if he knew I nicked that. He's very private about his ramblings.'

Pan to Auteur as he responds. His voice is exactly what one would expect from someone who's had their entire outer layer of skin peeled off. It's all hisses and slurring and trying to use shadow lips to make the 'Buh' sound.

'I write best with a playlist. And this suits the topic. Plus, Morlock can baise lui-même on a candlelit evening.' He giggles.

Cut to: Wide shot of the Godfathers. Gideon makes a move on the chess set, but it's clear Auteur either doesn't care or has forgotten he's playing. There's a better look at the room now. The glass windows of the lantern room are hidden behind shelves. Books, tomes, papers, scripts, screenplays, comic books, VHS tapes crumbling like mouldering Metsovone. Auteur is still hunched over, writing furiously.

Quick cut: the writing. We see now, they're letters, journal entries. Flashes of melodrama and purple prose. A Gothic Romance, like Morlock's musings. A copy of *Dracula* has been torn to pieces, Stoker's words tangled and mixed in with Auteur's.

Cut to: Godfather Gideon leans back in his seat, picking up a page. His eyes shine red in his mask. 'Epistolary. Going for authenticity?'

Pan to Auteur, who laughs (and it sounds like crunching glass). His shadow skin ripples, and we see the faintest bit of his bare biology. 'I like experimenting with different writing forms. I've never tried epistolary before. It's difficult. Flashing through all the different letters, journals, insightless bitching.'

Gideon takes the stage again, leaning forward. He's broad, big, but his impressive physicality pales against Auteur's visage. 'Personally, I think you should have gone with a screenplay. Play up a Universal Horror vibe, or Hammer. Go a bit more pulpy.'

Close up on Auteur's face/mask. Nerve endings are still pulsing on the naked bone. 'I wanted to make it genuine and respectful to Stoker.'

‘What does it matter? You claim these events happened regardless. Is it really important how you write it?’

Quick cut: Auteur. Gideon’s comment strikes a nerve. There’s another quick cut, Auteur’s skin bristles and spikes, cut back to Gideon looking unimpressed.

‘They have not happened until I have written them!’ Auteur asserts.

Gideon bites his cheek. Zoom in on his hand, gripping the table. ‘Only because you’re plucking the possibilities you find the most exhilarating and scribbling them down. The possibilities the Loa outside whisper to you when you’re at your most delusional.’

Cut to: Auteur, mood changed. His shadow curls back around his mouth, in a smile. He has too many teeth. ‘The Homeworlder Observer Effect… writ flesh.’ He giggles. ‘So to speak.’ His shadow skin shivers, giggling with him.

Cut back to Gideon, who’s giving up. There’s a dying loyalty here, somewhere. Maybe an old friendship, running on fumes. Gideon risks the Faction’s ire by keeping contact with the disgraced Auteur, and we can see that being loyal to a former fellow House cousin, and current brother in the Faction, is weighing hard on Gideon. He slowly reaches out, grabs a different page. He holds it up to his face, reading. He humors Auteur, but does not believe him.

The Enemy cannot fucking be Dracula, of all people.

Over his shoulder, zoom in to…

Letter, Mrs. Mina Harker to Professor Abraham Van Helsing

My loved Professor,

It’s been two weeks. Two weeks of sleepless nights and waking nightmares that have felt like two years. They rest heavy on my heart, and I write to you once again not in hope that you will one day read this letter, but merely for the chance to write at all.

Two weeks since we found Jonathan, and two weeks since I first wrote to you. Sobbing, angry, cursing and screaming, I wrote to you in hopes that you would come, like the swift hero of our first story, laden with garlic and stakes and words of wisdom for all of us. You of course, did not come. You remain as silent as always, your fate adrift on the storms in Transylvania. We worry for you, and I wish I could pray for your safety. The words fall flat and empty when I turn to our Lord. I wish your mission was a success, and I hope your silence is not a fatal

one.

Two weeks. Jonathan was gone for only a day. He left the home, as usual, promising with that bright smile and twinkling eyes that my fears, my nightmares, were unfounded. We found him that night, naked, skinned, tied to the door of the church.

Dr. Seward believes that, had Mr. Morris (the gallant gentlemen) still lived, he too would have been brutally murdered. This was both revenge, but also, I feel, a warning.

Cut to: Gideon putting the page down. Long shot, Auteur ducks his head, trying to pretend he was not staring in anticipation of praise or complimentary criticism.

'So, Van Helsing, the best character in the novel, isn't even here for the sequel.'

Auteur's shoulders sag a little. 'He had business in Transylvania. Another vampire, some Baron who fancied himself.'

'That's a movie. *Brides of Dracula*.'

Auteur's grin returns, with even more teeth. 'And *Dracula* is a fictional novel. And yet, for some, in some timeline, it happened. Solidifying the best-laid schemes of timeships and Loa.'

Cut to the outside of the Spire. A Loa raps at the glass with its claw/tentacle/ moment.

Quick cut back to Gideon, who hears the noise, watching the space behind the bookshelf. He turns back to the table, picking up a few pages. Sweeping back to his shoulder, closing in to…

Mina Harker's Journal

19th Nov – First thing's first. Yes. I have won. I won alone. I found the Count, my own demon, I faced him, and I killed him. I carried with me the sword taken from Lord Godalming. I knew Dr. Seward and Arthur would object. They would have wanted to go with me, and during the sunlit hours. But the Count had been whispering to me, as if he was in the bed with me, his arms wrapped around me. He killed Jonathan out of spite and vengeance. He would have done the same with Mr. Morris. But he whispered to me, cold and sly as the winter, and told me that Dr. Seward and Lord Godalming would die that very night if I did not come to him.

He called it a 'formal invitation', with all the sinister and sick politeness that

monster pretends to have.

The moon was bright and fat in the sky. The snow lingered in corners and crevices of the countryside, leaving the ground wet and sticky under the pale light. The hills of England looked and sound like a bog, I thought, as my foot squelched deep into freezing mud.

Not since Transylvania had I ever known such cold. The air was biting. My fingers were numb, my nose and my ears burned. It was like wading through ice water, my joints and muscles fighting my advance, slowing. But I forced myself to take deep breaths, choking on the frigid air, lungs stinging. I tried to enjoy it. Tried to remember that the pain, that feeling the pain, was good.

I was still alive. I am alive now. But I repeated that in her mind, once, twice, thrice, over and over, as I pressed my tongue against my canines. The razor points pricked the soft flesh, and I tasted the brief copper tang of blood. I remember the sick in her stomach, sour and numb, leaping at the flavour.

I had to keep reminding myself, even as I hungered. She's still alive. She's still alive.

'I'm alive,' I told the dark.

'We'll fix that soon,' His voice carried from nowhere, a phantom on the bladed wind.

Bedfordshire was desolate, empty. There was nothing but the moan and ice of winter, promising colder days and nights yet to come. I could not help but feel that the closer I came to my destination, however slowly, the colder and darker the land became. Something much worse and more evil than winter awaited me.

I thought of Dante's Inferno, and remembered my confusion and horror at first reading of the lake of ice. With imagery far removed from the fire and brimstone of Catholic schooling, I could only remember Satan entombed in the freeze, the world without God knowing nothing but the oppressive cold. The comparison was fitting. Surely, God's gaze was nowhere near Bedfordshire that night. Imagining crossing Satan's lake was perhaps melodramatic, but as I felt my sharpened teeth again, and felt the sting of the silver crucifix in my grip, I felt excused for the brief foray into the theatrical.

I tightened my crimson scarf around my neck. The wounds had been worsening as my symptoms did. Not quite the discrete puncture marks of legend… my throat was once again covered in bites, scabs, scars. A sign of the Count's blood once again boiling in my veins.

Jonathan was never afraid of those scars.

Bedfordshire is some time more than an hour away from London. I allowed my driver as close as I felt secure, and walked the rest of the way towards the shrine. Finally, forcing my way through the chill, I saw the structure, cruel and naked in the moonlight. A small hutch, big enough for only one person, made entirely of bleached skeletons. I could smell nothing, even with the Count's infection, not in that cold.

All the skeletons, ancient and long dead, had their mouths open in silent screams.

The hutch was only a shelter for an entrance into a cavern dug deep into Bedfordshire's flesh…

Auteur Notes (scribbled quickly and messily in the margins and between sentences of the unfinished journal entry. A mix of Mina's smooth, cultured recounting, and Auteur's tickled rambling.)

And the story from there is simple really. The Bedfordshire mine, the nest of the Count, his horde, and his faithful. The mine, a… ghost. A ghost from another time, an echo from the Earth's distant future. Something cruel, built by invaders of metal and spite, digging too deeply and too greedily into Earth's crust. Finding something, an accident, something they were not prepared for. History. New, different, alien. A History wrapped tightly into a coil of absence, locked in the rock and dark of the planet. The aliens were rejected by that History, blown to smithereens, left to die in the streets and in their echoing control rooms.

Dracula believes the History within the Earth is his to take. He came to England in the first place on an instinct, his undead days filled with dreams whispered to him by the white-faced woman, the lady in black. Lilith, mother of monsters. He dreamed of her, of her mask opening and revealing the evil beneath, the monstrosity. Whispering to him, caressing him, telling him of the History that can be found in the mine. The tightened clasp, the Heart of the Earth, is unreachable. But the cavern of Bedfordshire, the shadow from tomorrow cast on yesterday, leaks with raw history. The walls drip with the years of which the Earth is built.

One could write a new story with the Bedfordshire mine, make themselves the center of the wet and sticky History that drips from the cavern's ceiling. A history of a kingdom, a dynasty of the night.

His original voyage on the Demeter was full of the thoughts of taking the Empire of Victoria, of chaining the Queen to his throne and spilling his blood in the Thames. Allowing the creature of darkness to crawl and venture forth as London's time in the day shortened and shortened. The Empire, of which the sun

would never set, would become one that pulsed and thrived at night.

'Now, wait a minute. Hold on.' Voiceover, to cut to Gideon. He's looking about as fed up as someone wearing a skull mask can. 'Not only is this another timeline where Dracula not only existed but continued existing, but this is a timeline where he was resurrected by some greater power to become the enemy? By literally rewriting Earth's history?'

'It's what the Loa said, yes.'

Gideon huffs. 'Y'know, I rather want to believe you made this one up.'

This stings Auteur, pan to his hurt feels and pouting shadow lip. 'Why?'

'Auteur, for Grandfather's sake, Dracula can't be the enemy.'

'Because he's fictional?' Auteur is getting defensive.

'Because he's fucking Dracula. He's not some evil god, or conquering demon. He's a parasite, torn between trying to leech off society's elite and building a goddamn harem.'

Long shot, the hanging silence. They're staring at each other. Auteur's shadow skin moves like an armour of insects.

'I'm just saying,' close up to Gideon, trying to lighten the mood, 'of all the possible timelines the Loa whispered to you, this was the one you wanted to write about? Besides, isn't this technically incorrect? Isn't it going against the certainty that the enemy can't be related to the Yssgaroth?'

Sweep to Auteur, he hesitates, then quickly searches for another page, hands it to Gideon. It's still dripping ink. 'There's going to be a section of the book full of sections from the cultist's bible, of sorts. Here.'

Gideon takes it. Close up on their hands, the shadow stuff on Auteur's knuckles caressing Gideon's gloves uncomfortably.

Over the shoulder, on to…

The Dragon Scriptures, The Master's Gospel, Chapter Four, verses One to Twenty-Three

… and on the sixth day of the journey towards England, the Prince and the Apostles waited in the heart of the ship. The favored few feasted on the crew of the vessel and harvested the silvered life gifts from their marrow, whilst the Prince slept and plotted and spoke with Lilith, she who is Queen and Mother of Monsters, she who breathed Unlife back into the Prince's lungs.

And his apostles witnessed Lilith's preachings to the Prince carving themselves on the obsidian skin of his casket, his words and teachings etched in soaked scarlet.

And the Prince's words were thus: 'The Mother did lead me through the shadowed wastes of the nether, and showed me the Spiral, the very structure of History stitched and sewn between stars like a tapestry of gold and bronze. She brought me close to the Very Fabric, and stroked its skin with her sharpened nail, a claw as diamond, and I saw the Forefathers press their faces against the skin, craving more of her touch.

'Yssgaroth,' she hissed, her tongue sliding through her razor teeth behind her mask, 'the Taint which boils within you. Trapped behind the Very Fabric.'

And she turned to me, and I could feel her inside me, around me, as her robes and cloak of rainbow encircled me, as her teeth pierced my throat. 'You are not Yssgaroth. You are more. You are distilled, refined, like a drop of the purest wine. You are no longer a Taint from beyond the Fabric… you are…

Cut back to Gideon. He doesn't look any less impatient. 'He 'are' what?'

'I haven't written that part yet.'

'What, the Loa forgot to mention it? Didn't come up during outlining?'

'I may be embellishing… slightly. You know Loa, they have to get their gist across without words, so I have to fill in the gaps in logic that the shrill shriek of time eddies or the crinkling of fracturing time tracks leave behind.'

'You're making it up.'

'Je prends une licence créative, ton bâtard!' Auteur snaps.

Gideon sighs and drops both the page and the subject. Long shot of the room. It looks even more cluttered than before, the shelves even more crammed with fiction. All Auteur's, the writings and ramblings and home movies of History and Alternates, whispered and sung to him by the flocks of Loa drawn to the Shadow Spire's anti-light. He believes nothing is real unless he writes them all down. Thinks himself the 'Author of the Spiral Politic.' Anything that happens that he hasn't written is not valid. The sort of thinking that ran him off the Homeworld and into the arms of the Faction in the first place (until they decided they couldn't stand him either, and stuck him in the Spire).

Cut back to Auteur, just to let it sink in that, a skinless Houseworlder, shadow wrapped around him like pitch flesh, is really fucking creepy.

'This Lilith,' Gideon attempts, 'have the Loa actually given you any idea who she is?'

Auteur is pouting now, muttering to himself about genius never being accepted in his time. Gideon relents, and picks up Mina's account, resuming his reading. Over the shoulder, as Auteur mutters something about a 'Lady Waki' and a 'Queen Charlotte,' cutting to…

The cultists were all over me, more and more joining the fray, pulling at my hair, forcing me down on my knees, keeping me restrained. These cultists, these heretics, they seemed hardly human. Nothing but scrawny limbs and yellowed nails. And the Count stood watching, his icy stare meeting mine. He wanted to see me subservient before him. He reached out and cupped my chin in his grip, skin as cold as the winter outside the cave. He looked the same. His slicked back hair, his thick mustache, broad shoulders draped in black.

'I admit, Mina, to a certain… fascination with you. The last time we met, you proved yourself not a victim, but an adversary. Used my act of vengeance upon the Men as a means of finding me, and killing me.' His voice remained calm, but there was an edge to it. He was biting rage, trying to remain civil, impressive.

Ever the gentlemen.

I forced myself to hold his gaze (the sick in my stomach leapt, as if he wished to jump from my throat and embrace him). 'Why, Count. Are you proposing?'

He slapped me. It stung, and his worshipers laughed, but I couldn't help but grin as I tasted the blood on my lip, the copper too sweet.

'Insolent wretch,' he snarled, showing me his teeth. 'You will be my slave, as will be all who dare assume they could be anything more in my Court.' He looked up to the ceiling of the cavern, arms stretched wide. 'The Domain of Blood, as promised by Lilith.' His snarl turned into a sickly sweet smile. 'I think she rather fancies me, you know.'

I couldn't help it. The blood in my mouth was too strong, the grips of the cultists on my arms too tight. 'People often have a fondness for their dogs.'

He roared and undoubtedly would have torn something of mine clean from my body, but at that point, the cavern shook. Pieces of the cleaning crumbled, and I could see the blood of the Earth, green pus and a white… absence… dripping from the walls, from the floor. The cultists were panicking, chittering and bickering.

'Our presence is causing the mine's decay to increase,' Dracula growled. 'It will continue to break down through Earth's past. The present interacting with it will speed the effect. I don't have long.'

He was gripping a golden chalice, cast in the image of a dragon wrapped tightly around a gnarled tree. He was holding it to the air, collecting the Earth's fluid.

'History, Mina. Corruptible. Rewriteable.' His eyes flashed. 'Edible.'

I took a deep breath while he continued speaking, lost in his theatricality, and gripped my fists. His followers had not had time to remove the knife I carried. Everything was happening too quickly, the cave was vanishing sooner than

expected. Whatever ritual, whatever had to be done to create the Count's new domain, it had to happen now. I heard a few things, words of a war, of aristocratic houses he would have to wage battle with. I drank the blood in my mouth, felt it go down my throat like mead.

I bared my teeth and roared, just as he would. His followers were weak and fled, my strength too similar to their 'Prince,' too powerful, too frightening. I ran towards him, even as he raised the chalice to his lips, drinking Earth's history like he would blood.

Lucy's blood.

My blood.

My knife was in his chest before he realized I was there. I plunged it deep into his heart, watched his shock, his realisation.

My heart sunk when he smiled.

He raised the chalice again. The white void dripped from his lips. 'To your health, Mrs. Harker.'

Gideon sets the page down.

'Human history… but with Dracula as its figurehead.'

Auteur giggles, more to himself. 'Say it.'

'I'd rather not.'

'Dis-le,' Auteur coos.

Close up on Gideon. He's fucking had it. 'A new kind of History.'

Cut to Auteur, who cackles and goes back to scribbling. Long shot as Gideon stands, sending one last look to the chess set. His visits to the Spire have been becoming less and less frequent. It might be time to sever familial loyalties all together.

'I still say the enemy can't be Dracula.'

He leaves the room. Focus on Auteur, who keeps writing, slow zoom as his shadow curls into the air, tendrils caressing pages.

EXT: THE ROCKY SHORE

Zoom in to Gideon leaving the Spire, walking towards his Shrine (a BMW Gina, never produced, never built, still fuzzy on the edges from perceptual grafting).

Suddenly, music under, the sound of Loa. The swarm is attacking, quick cuts and shots of beaks, of teeth, of open maws of sharp certainties, tendrils and tongues of poisonous maybes. Gideon doesn't even have time to scream. Rapid succession, cuts to Gideon, cuts to blood splattering on the razor rocks, to flesh and bone

unraveling in silver threads like yarn, the Loa hissing and roaring like a quantum choir.

A sacrifice? A gift to the Loa, for being Auteur's muses? Maybe.

INT: THE LANTERN ROOM

Long shot of Auteur's shadow encompassing the room. Rapid succession of it creeping, crawling, slinking, overtaking the floor, the walls of shelves, inking through pages of books, crawling into the crevices of the video tapes.

He's laughing. His shadow is laughing with him, waves in an ocean of pitch.

'Why can't the enemy be Dracula,' Auteur cackles. 'Not like he has a copyright.'

EXT: THE ROCKY SHORE.

Gideon is gone. Long, solemn shot of silvery threads, torn biodata, drifting in the breeze. A single Loa, a runt in the flock, is pecking at the ground for more sizable chunks of timeline. Closer shot, and through the flutter of seconds and buzzing of hours, it becomes clear the Loa looks like a bat.

Long shot. The Shadow Spire. Tall and black against a red sky, an ocean of something vile and sour crashing on the shore. Hold. Hold.

Fade out.

Black.

Pre-narrative Briefing H

The psychological manifestations of encounters with the Enemy which have caused the greatest impact, appear to me to be those within the genre known to humans as 'body-horror'. But we must remember that to members of the Great Houses, raised to regard themselves as shining nigh immortals, beyond and out-with the processes of decay, multiply renewable in life, in death perpetually enshrined within the Computational Hereafters, the embodiments and the habitations of decay must always be particularly the epitome of grue.

Captain Robert Scarratt, Rtd, Deceased.

Life-cycle

Pure, dazzling light. As if a page had turned to reveal the story beyond.

Suddenly the sky was full of possibility. Silver. Then gold. Yellow, splattered with flecks of scarlet, reminding Fen of raspberry-ripple ice cream. Melting.

Then the heavens blurred. Warped. Became a dizzying, kaleidoscopic swirl before remembering to be blue. Fluffy white clouds, straight from Constable's imagination, drifted lazily across the calm.

Cousin Jezebella led the way, the hem of her heavy, raven-black skirts drawing a line along the centre of the dusty road.

Jezebella. Forever creating paths within paths. Resolute. Absolutely focused. Never once altering course.

Well, almost never. Ever so slightly she sashayed to one side, but without pause carried on.

Behind her, Cousin Darius trod on whatever Jezebella had so gracefully avoided. Purposely, of course.

Fen glanced down to see an earthworm. Quite dead. The existence it might have led crushed into gravel.

'Never miss an opportunity, eh?'

'Hmm?'

'To kill off your ancestors.'

'Funny.' Darius made a sound. Might have been a sigh. Could have been a curse.

'What's the matter?'

'Bored.' He slowed his pace and together they walked side-by-side. **'I'm bored.'**

'Really? I would've thought time-ravaged, post-apocalyptic Britain would have been right up your street.'

If Jezebella was elegance and disordered-order made flesh, Darius ensured a cosmic balance. A time-bomb wrapped in the body of a warrior crowned with the impatience of a hyperactive five-year-old.

'Depends on the street.' He ran his hand through untidy ginger hair poking over the brow of his mask. **'Give me a time-ravaged, post-apocalyptic London and, yeah - I'm in my element. Broken skyscrapers. Rubble. Mutated rats the size of dinosaurs. Love it. But out here in…where was it?'**

'Kent.'

'Out here in Kent.' He curled his lip, turned on the heels of well-scuffed boots

and gestured. **‘Well, it’s all just vegetation isn’t it?’**

‘Patience, Cousin Darius,’ Jezebella chided without looking back. ‘It’ll soon be playtime.’

‘Promise?’ Absently his fingers brushed against his retropistol’s holster.

‘Oh yes.’ Jezebella froze. Slowly lifting her arm to 90 degrees she turned her head in the direction of her pointed finger. ‘I promise.’

At first Fen saw nothing out of the ordinary. More fields. Then hills. The branches of leafless trees scratching at the horizon. Nothing but green beneath blue as far as she could see. But then...yes.

Yes she saw it now.

Something dark. Mishapen. A faraway silhouette, crawling across the top of the landscape. It stopped, perhaps looking over its shoulder before disappearing over the hill.

‘Something dangerous?’ Darius asked - a hopeful, lopsided grin appearing beneath his mask.

Jezebella shot him a smile. ‘Why don’t we find out?’

An hour passed. Then another.

Along the way, once or twice, space-time coughed and shuddered. Spat out ghostly glimpses of long-dead farmers toiling in the fields. And the phantom shadows of silver men marching. What might have been an organic plane screamed overhead; in its wake - the scent of vomit and cheap aftershave.

Finally, beyond the hill - a timeship graveyard. The skeletons of several dozen vessels embedded in scorched, war-torn earth. Varied shapes. Sizes. Each belonging to a Great House. One or two still caught in the past’s echo. Pulsing in and out of existence. Exploding. Rusting. Crumbling into dust. Rewinding to reform. Over and over. Caught in an endless loop of life, death and dying.

One of the War in Heaven’s many battles was orchestrated here. Long ago and centuries from now and for a fortnight from tomorrow. If she squinted, and held her head just right, Fen could make out the wounds left in the air.

When they came across a Dreadnaught from the army of the Seventh Son of the Seventh Sun they decided to try their luck.

Consulting her fob-watch, Jezebella concluded they had three minutes and four seconds. Just long enough, she estimated, to get to the ship’s control deck and back. ‘I want you to stay here, Cousin Darius.’

‘You are joking?’

She indicated time-carrion emerging from one of the scars in the sky.

‘I’ll stay here!’ Darius drew his pistol and shot one of the monsters, laughing

with utter delight as it fell to the earth.

Fascinated, Fen watched the beast regress from full-grown pterosaur to egg before shattering into the ground. Dying before it was ever born.

'Now!' Jezebella commanded.

Fen darted into the Dreadnaught, following Jezebella along a buckling, smoke-filled corridor and onto the ship's deck. It was smaller than she expected. Cramped even. Littered with bodies. Smouldering. Broken. And…something else.

Something else was here. Standing over the corpses. A nightmare recorded in time.

'Jezebella – look!'

'Ignore them.'

'Jezebella-'

'I know! I see them, but we're running out of time! Just grab anything worth grabbing and get out of here!'

Fen scanned the consoles, the floors. Forcing herself to look at anything but those…things. Those things lurking at the corner of her vision. Monsters. Bending into impossible positions. Dragging away the charred bodies of soldiers.

Soldiers. So many soldiers.

One lay in front of her. Quasi-diamond flesh cracked and leaking glitter. By his hand – a dagger. Ornate and hot to the touch. She tucked it into her satchel, just as Jezebella grabbed her wrist and pulled her towards the corridor.

'Hu*rry!'*

They made it out of the ship seconds before it puffed into polychrome, then fire and nothingness before becoming a burning wreck again.

Fen slumped to the ground, gasping for breath. Jezebella handed her a flask and she took a greedy gulp. Then another. Water had never tasted so good.

She forced herself to her feet, wiped muddy hands on her skirt. What a mess she must look. Unlike Jezebella, of course. There she stood - not a hair out of place. You'd never guess she'd just run for her life through the ghost of a dying ship and back. A dying ship full of...

'What were those things?'

'I have no idea. Scavengers? Perhaps a rival House.' Jezebella shrugged 'Did you find anything?'

'Only this,' Fen retrieved the dagger, traced her finger along the intricate whirls etched into its hilt. *'I don't think it's worth anything - just liked the look of it. You?'*

Fen shook her head. 'A complete waste of time.'

'At least Cousin Darius enjoyed himself,' Fen scanned the field, counting at least two dozen broken eggshells. *'Hey – where is Darius?'*

A noise startled her. A dull thunk.

She turned to see Jezebella slump to the floor. The blur of a fist and then blackness.

Fen fluttered in and out of consciousness. She saw…

…snippets of a grey sky, threatening to rain.

…nothing.

…overgrown grass, rushing by. Her mask must be missing because she felt soft blades of green tickling her cheek.

…nothing.

…something dragging her through a field. She tried to focus but it was no good. The world was a blur. Just a series of fragments and shapes. Something, perhaps an animal, snaked along the ground beside her. And behind it… something else. An acrobat rolling, head over heels. Over and over and…

…nothing

She screamed when she woke. She couldn't help it. The terror just poured out.

A crowd of hundreds surrounded her. Dressed in patchwork; the uniform of every Great House reduced to rags and worn in parody.

Humanoid - but no two stood the same. They were twisted. Abnormal. Some stood with a stoop, others bent impossibly out of shape. Like the being directly in front of her – its feet planted firmly on the ground but, from the knees, stretched and arched to enable its head to rest on the earth. It looked for all the world like the letter 'n'.

A sea of blank faces stared at her in silence. Each one pale-pink and featureless. No – that was wrong. They all had features. Crude bumps where noses, lips, eyes should be. But, as if moulded in hot wax, sliding down each face until eventually pulled back into place by, Fen assumed, pure concentration.

One of her captors lurched forward. It stank of earth and stale sweat.

'What *are* you?**'** Fen clambered to her feet, edging away.

S/he spoke into Fen's mind; it's 'voice' sounded like it was trying to sing with a mouth full of porridge. 'We are Vermis Superior.'

'You're the enemy, **aren't you?'** Her head swam and it felt like the bones had left her legs, yet somehow she remained standing. **'You're** *the enemy.'*

'Call us what you like, but we are merely part of a whole. As are you.' It nodded behind her.

She turned to find more of the monsters. Crouched on the ground, tearing cloth. She recognised the uniforms instantly; Jezebella's gown, her cousin's fine leather

boots; Darius' jacket and his mask – the skull of what might have been a giant bat.

One of the creatures sat cross-legged, stitching Darius' vest onto its sleeve, back pressed against a towering wall of glass.

'What **the hell…?'** It made her eyes hurt, this construct of multiple dimensions. An enormous cube. Wide as the meadow. Wider. So high she couldn't see the top. But when she looked around its edge she found it narrow as a sheet of paper.

'A timeship,' she whispered. The strangest she'd ever seen.

Roughly sixty feet above, with no regard for gravity, two Vermis Superior crawled slug-like up its surface. When she saw what they dragged behind them, Fen's legs gave way.

Jezebella and Darius. Naked. Dead. Their heads cracked open.

'*Bring them back!'* she screamed. '**Bring them back**, you bastards!' she hammered on the glassy surface and only then saw what was contained within.

Earth.

And bodies.

A Krittikiki. Several Ladies of the Blue Dawn. The organic remains of things that had lived inside machines. Two soldiers of the army of the Seventh Son of the Seventh Sun. Her stomach lurched when she spotted a long-lost cousin.

Row upon row of decaying corpses sandwiched between layer upon layer of earth. It was like staring into a giant worm farm.

'***O****h n*o…' she slapped a hand to her mouth, realising that was exactly what she was looking at.

The Vermis Superior's leader placed a finger against the glass. On the other side of the panel a worm wriggled into the eye socket of a giant arachnid.

And then she saw others - so many others - burrowing their way through the dead.

'They feast on the soldiers of time,' the Vermis Superior gurgled in Fen's mind. **'And given time they become us. And we become them…'**

As if on cue the sky growled thunder, heralding the sound of materialising timeships. The beat of every wing that ever was and ever will be.

Doors – the shape of which Fen had no word for – opened in space and the smell of paper and ink and old ideas leaked through. Followed by beings shrouded in feathers.

Heads bowed, arms held behind their backs, they walked on taloned feet.

Were-Crows.

In unison, their heads cocked to one side. Eyes, black pin-pricks, glinted against slick black feathers. Cruel, jet beaks dropped open, and they screamed before

falling upon the Vermis Superior.

Pecking at them. Tearing. Devouring time.

Fen gagged, forced herself to her feet. Gathering her skirts she ran. Ran from this cycle of madness. Heart hammering so hard it might smash through her chest.

There was a forest ahead. Sprawling and dense. A way off, but she'd make it. She could hide there. She could be safe.

Remembering the dagger in her satchel she retrieved it with a shaking hand. For all the good it'll do me against them.

Fen chanced a look over her shoulder, surprised at how far she'd run, relieved that she wasn't being followed. Ignoring her better judgment she slowed, stopped to take in the scene.

There had to be thousands of them. Standing silent and still as sentries. The remains of the Vermis Superior strewn around them in a field bathed in red.

Suddenly, as one, they spread their wings. The shockwave knocked Fen to the ground. Hard.

The Were-Crows took to the sky, their screams bleaching it white.

Higher they flew. Higher still. And there they multiplied. And again. Wheeling and knotting together in rows. Becoming a scrawl across the sky.

To Fen they looked like symbols. Strange hieroglyphs – alien yet somehow familiar.

Realisation burned away what was left of her sanity and she fell back on the grass beneath a mockery of language.

Words written backwards.

She stared up and, for a short time, her eyes met with the final aspect of The Enemy. A cosmic giant, one finger of one hand pressed to its sneering lips. Hush. Feeding off fiction. Forever hungry for new worlds to consume.

Reality flicked to the left.

And she was gone.

Pre-narrative Briefing I

You must see how it's going. Ignore the differences and look for what the narratives aren't saying. If these are the things we can understand – the lies we

can tolerate – what must the actually UNSPEAKABLE be like. You will encounter it in open combat: you [have / will have] come to know the gelid feeling of its touch – not on your body, nor your mind: but in the consistency of the flow of time itself. Inside the 'all-that-is' where the 'now' becomes the 'past'.

Entarodora

First Draft

We are all stories. That was the lesson the Piebald Man had learned so many years ago, and it was the one thing he had tried teach them all. Even as he himself was lost to history, it stayed with them; a principle to be passed down, from one generation to the next. A code that would keep them alive and safe.

For each of them, they would hear it in different ways. The words of an ancient, silhouetted by a camp fire, drawing them in; the whispers of an elder brother and the secret knowledge of bedtime; the urgent warning of a parent to behave and not draw attention.

There was an urge inside of Man, they were told.

It was something that manifested in war and conflict and politics and science and technology. There was a need to dominate and control that had shaped that history. A driving force pushing humanity on to bigger and greater achievements, only ever looking outwards, finding new lands to conquer.

But there were also those who looked within. These people, far fewer in number, had a curiosity about what it meant to be human, about how it was that they lived and died. They saw the many imperfections in their bodies and minds, and they wanted to overcome them.

Alchemists and magicians, doctors and philosophers, scientists and technicians. All across the centuries, these dreamers were all trying to create life anew.

But life was never simple and life was too wilful, and so whenever man did succeed in is reinvention, it rarely took the form they expected.

And in that disappointment, that confounding of hope and expectation, the same need to control came to the fore.

Because if man could create life, he could also discard it.

It was a lesson those creations swiftly learned. Those that survived had to learn new ways.

We are all stories, the Piebald Man had told them. And we must never be more than stories.

They were footnotes in history that were to be forgotten. No more than echoes, fading into the dark, unseen. And with that achieved, if they lived on in memory

at all, it would never be as anything other than stories. Tales of horror or faerie romance or science gone awry.

The exact nature of the fiction didn't matter, just so long as they never stepped out of the page.

That those around them never suspected they might be real.

i.

It was Sunday mornings that Lucy's parents let her out to play.

The village sat on a hilltop that was wet and cold and battered by every storm that rolled off the coast. 'Everything the weather can throw at this place, has been,' her father had told her with a smile, 'and it's still here. It's the kind of spot that survives.'

And though it was unspoken, Lucy understood that meant it was the kind of place for them.

There were old stone walls and crumbling masonry, tight alleyways between cottages, and long grasses. All week Lucy would walk with her mother through those streets, down to the school, and she would sit for her lessons, and she'd play and laugh with the other children, and she'd wait for Sunday mornings.

Sundays, most people still went to the Church. Her father said going to church had almost died out a hundred years back, but things changed and sometimes people just needed something to believe in. Lucy's was nearly the last house in the village; only an empty shell next door, then the Scott farm that led down to the coast. And on Sundays, the church bell would ring, and Lucy would wait at her window. The Scotts were God-fearing people, her father said. Which meant every Sunday, they would all traipse up the hill, and there would be no-one between her and the coast.

And Lucy could run.

Not like she did in the schoolyard, or round the house, or down to the shop. On Sundays, just for an hour, when the people were gone and the SkyEyes were out of place, she could run free. Her dad called them something different; he said it was a 'drone network', but he was the only one, for everyone else they were the SkyEyes. Sometimes the time changed a bit, but Lucy could almost always get out on a Sunday. Slipping over the fields and hedgerows, moving from one spot to another faster than the eye could follow. If it weren't for the wind on her face, she would barely have known she was moving at all.

Only the fields were no fun. Good because they were clear, yes, but boring because of it as well.

Lucy liked the cove.

The path that led down to it was steep, worn down by footsteps. If you wanted to be safe – and with the rocks and foam below, you wanted to be safe – then you picked your way down, clinging to the grasses and trusting your feet to the larger stones.

The thing was, picking your way down slow and safe was no fun. And Lucy needed to feel the wind on her face in order to feel free.

Step, jump, step, step, stretch.

Then she was down at the shore. Spray on her face. A tight curve of pebbles. Cliffs towering all around. Unseen.

And then she would run. Leaping from rock to rock, over the pools, skipping across the long spur out into the sea. The air racing past, brushing her skin, somehow both pushing her back and pulling her on.

It was a routine, a circuit she did every week, faster and faster, daring herself to be quicker, to not slip.

It was that Sunday that she saw him for the first time. Or, at least, really saw him. He'd been at school for a few weeks by then. An orphan or something, come to live with a distant relative. Dark haired, pale, a lost soul on the edge of the playground. Lucy knew his name and that was about it, had no idea how he would shape all the days that followed.

Lucy reached the end of the spur, and stood there, breathing sea air, looking out to the horizon. A long minute, perfectly still, not moving, not running. Letting the world roll in over her.

Sunlight broke through brush-stroke clouds, marking out the distant horizon.

Lucy smiled. When she turned back toward land, she was ready to run again, took a deep breath. And stopped.

There was something beneath the water, but the ripples and currents made it hard to see more than just the colour. Lucy squinted, studied the pale shadow in the cove, and her mouth opened, the sudden horror of realisation. It was a body. A body in the water.

She stared at it, and her eyes narrowed, the 'o' of her mouth settling back into a straight line and then twitching into a half-smile. This was a joke. It was someone playing a trick. They were waiting down in the water, holding their breath, ready for her to move or jump in or something. But Lucy was smarter than that, and she knew she just had to be patient and wait them out.

And she waited and watched, long seconds studying the shifting water, looking for a telltale trail of bubbles or any sign of movement from the shape.

And slowly, Lucy's absolute certainty that this was not really happening began to seep away.

Someone had drowned, someone had died.

Lucy looked back along the spur, across the rocks, to the path. She started to move, slowly at first, then picking up speed. Running home, running for help.

She glanced back, trying to fix the position of the body in her mind, so there'd be no doubt she could find it again. But then there was something in front of her on the path, something unseen that hadn't been there a moment before. Lucy bounced off it and tumbled back, landing hard on the pebbles.

The fall knocked the wind from her, and as she gasped, she blinked, trying to understand what had happened.

Then there was a face looming over her. Pale and wet, salt water dripping from long black hair. A boy's face.

Lucy blinked, not sure what was happening, and the boy smiled. 'You're one of us, aren't you?'

The boy, Lucy realised. The new boy from school. Silas.

He reached down, and she took his hand, letting him pull her to her feet.

'Please,' she said. 'Help, there's –'

She turned around to the cove, pointing to the water. But it was empty, the body was gone.

'There was a –'

Silas smiled. 'I move pretty quick sometimes.'

It was only as he brushed past her, back down towards the water that Lucy realised the boy had no clothes on.

'What are you doing? Why are you –'

He glanced back and winked, 'Not as quick as you, mind.'

Lucy felt a sudden flutter of danger, the first lesson asserting itself: Always remember, you're just a story, nothing more.

She shook her head. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

He smiled again. 'It's fine. I saw.'

Lucy started to back away. She wanted to run. To be home. But she knew she couldn't, she had to stay here. Because any move would just confirm what he'd thought he'd seen.

'Look,' he said. He turned his head, pulling the hair back from his ear. He tilted his head forward, pulled the flap of his ear forward. He waited, expectant, and eventually, Lucy leaned in. A tiny series of holes ran down behind the ear, down to his jawline. Invisible with his long hair, invisible unless you knew to look.

'Sunday mornings are good,' he said. 'The people are all up at that church. And there's a gap in the SkyEyes. Here, watch.'

He ran along the spar, and jumped. As he disappeared beneath the water, Lucy

looked up the path again. If there was a time to run, this was it. But curiosity got the better of her.

She stared out at the waters. The boy was there again now. His pale shadow beneath the waves. Slipping down, sinking to the bottom of the cove.

Then he moved. Legs kicking, darting back out to sea, losing shape and colour to the waves. Lucy edged closer to the shore. No one could move like that. No one could hold their breath like that.

The waters erupted. He flew over her head, arcing, coming back down to land on the path. The same spot where she'd run into something that hadn't been there a moment earlier. A trick Silas must have practiced over and over.

'See?' He smiled again.

And this time, Lucy smiled back. Because in that moment, she knew she wasn't alone any more.

ii.

The rain blew horizontal across the churchyard the day they put her parents in the ground.

Lucy was seventeen, then. Each morning she took the speed bus down to Truro. There was an education centre offering a foundation course in architectural design; only three days a week, which meant she could help out in her parents' workshop for the rest of the week.

There was no hard and fast agreement between, but there were plenty of days when Silas would see her off, and others where he would be waiting for her when she got back.

She'd known something was wrong when she saw him, just a glimpse through the windscreen as the bus turned the corner into the village. The way he was pacing, the way his head was angled, the way it jerked up when he heard the bus, the way he then stood frozen until it pulled to a stop.

When she climbed down, he'd just wrapped his arms around her and held her tight.

'What's happened?' she'd asked, but in her heart, she'd already known.

There was an investigation and a coroner's report – a faulty unit on the kiln – but it was all quietly and quickly done. And then, ten days later, they buried her parents. Two caskets, slowly lowered into one plot, side by side.

Tradition said there should be a wake of sorts, but Silas knew her well enough by then. His hand was in hers as the caskets disappeared from view, waiting as her fingers squeezed tighter and tighter around his.

Lucy just needed a little space, he told the mourners. He'd arranged for a tab at

the pub, and they should go and celebrate and remember. He and Lucy would join them all a little later.

And when everyone was gone, they walked off, hand in hand, underneath an umbrella, down to the shore.

'I dreamed about her last night,' Lucy said. 'I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, but…'

'Perfect memories,' Silas smiled.

That was what he always called her dreams. Lucy had always been jealous when he spoke of his dreams, of flying high over the fields or meeting someone famous. Even the nightmares and anxiety dreams seemed extraordinary and tempting. Her dreams were never that. Hers were just dull and mundane, snapshots of things past. At least, they had been.

'It wasn't like that,' Lucy said. 'I was… I was a baby, I think. I must have been. Because she looked so young, like in her wedding photos, and… I was small enough to fit in her arms, it was weird. She was stroking my face and whispering something to me, over and over.'

There was a moment of awkward silence. Lucy could tell he was curious to hear more, but for her part, she didn't really know what to say. In the end, they walked on, and found a shelter and an old bench overlooking the harbour.

The rain was easing off then, but Lucy was tired and needed to sit down. They stayed there in silence, looking out at the quay and the boats bobbing up and down.

Lucy wasn't aware of thinking about it at the time, but she must have been. Because the second Silas was about to suggest heading back, in the very moment he turned his head towards her, the question was there on her lips, like it had been waiting all this time.

'When did you learn?' Lucy asked. 'About us? About your heritage?'

Silas blinked in confusion, then indecision.

'We shouldn't –'

'There's no-one here,' Lucy said. 'No-one but me. Please.'

Silas glanced down at his hands in his lap, uncomfortable. Then, when he looked back at her, he began to speak.

'There was an afternoon, back when I was young. This was before I met you, before my mum died and my dad disappeared, and…' He stopped, took a deep breath, and explained.

They'd been living in the lakes, and its fells and the wide open stretches of water were Silas' first memories. They were just images and vague impressions now, but mixed in with them was that afternoon.

It had been cold and gloomy, deep into the winter. His father had wrapped him up, and they'd headed out into the dark. Every now and then, his father would check the time.

'Even back then I'd known what he was doing,' Silas said. 'It was the early days of the network, and there were plenty of gaps in the SkyEyes. Windows where we could go swimming. Properly swimming.' That emphasis brought a very brief smile to his face and hers, then he glanced away and continued. 'But we were nowhere near the lakes that day, just following this footpath up into the trees.'

Then, they must have hit the right moment, when the SkyEyes were blind, and his father had led him off the path. Hurrying though the dark, they'd found a small hut ahead. His father had paused at the door, then taken a deep breath and ushered him inside.

The hut had been crowded. Half a dozen other children, all differing ages, waiting patiently on the floor; their parents whispering to each other in corners. His father had sat him down with the others, then withdrew.

'It felt like a game,' Silas said. 'Like a kids' party or something. But it wasn't. I think we all knew. You could feel it somehow, like there was weight to it. This was grown-up stuff.'

'And that's when your dad told you?'

Silas shook his head. 'It wasn't my dad. It was a woman. I'd never seen her before. Some big old woman with curly hair. Passing on the words, like they were passed on to her. You know, the 'We are all Stories' and the rest of it.' He stopped, looked out at the harbour. The wind was picking up again. He squeezed her hand. 'We should get going.'

'Could we –' Lucy stopped herself.

'Could we what?' Silas asked.

'Could we not go back. To the pub. Could… they come here? We could do a toast, down on the quay or something.'

Silas looked at her, and Lucy could see him weighing it up in his head. He'd gotten more and more like that over the years. Looking ahead, finding the right thing to do, taking the safe path.

'That… sounds nice,' he said, and smiled. 'We'll have to be quick, though.'

Lucy nodded. 'You go. I'll wait here.'

'You sure?'

'I'm sure.'

She watched him go, hurrying back up the lanes, then looked back to the sea. Part of her desperately wanted to run and feel free again, but the gaps in the SkyEyes were getting fewer and fewer. Instead, Lucy stood up and slowly walked

down towards the harbour wall. The sea breeze on her face and the taste of salt in the air was as close as she could get to running today.

Drops of rain began to spit once more as she walked out onto its stones. Lucy went to raise her umbrella, but the catch stuck. As she struggled, the rain grew heavier. The harbourside toast suddenly seemed like a worse idea than joining the wake proper. She could imagine Silas leading a crowd of villagers down only to find her soaked to the skin with a broken and bent umbrella.

As she turned back to join him, the wind caught the umbrella and pulled it fully open, and fully open it caught the wind even more and was snatched away, spinning across the fat stones.

'Oh bloody shit,' Lucy cried and hurried after it. Her hand closed on the handle before it could skip off into the harbour. Then, as she wrestled with it, the wind blew again, and she found her heels rocking back on the edge of the wall.

She seemed to stay there forever, hanging on the edge, torn between releasing her hold on the umbrella and working out what she could reach for to steady herself, her hair coming loose and rain spattering against her dress.

And then she was falling.

She avoided the edge of the nearest sailboat, finding the gap between it and its neighbour, barely a moment to cry out before she was in the water. The cold took her breath away, and she fought for the surface, grabbing at air as she rose. Then a wave took her, throwing her against the side of the boat she'd missed in the fall, her head connecting with its hull. She went under again, pushed and pulled, the fabric of her dress tying her legs, losing herself to the water and the dark.

And then there was a pull on her arm, fingers squeezing and taking hold, dragging her back out from between the rocking boats into the clear water. Out and up, back to the surface. Hair and water in her eyes, Lucy could barely make out anything as she was hauled up onto land.

As she wiped her eyes, Lucy saw they were on the slipway, a good thirty metres from the spot where she'd fallen. Silas was there, dripping wet, still holding tight to her arm, a fear on his face that she'd never seen before. And behind him, grey suited men and women, shell-shocked, watching.

Old David drove them both back to her house and built a fire as Silas warmed some soup he'd found.

'She'll be okay?' he asked Silas at the door.

'We'll be fine,' Silas assured him. David looked between them, then nodded and left.

Silas wrapped Lucy in a blanket in front of the fire, depositing a steaming cup in her hands. As she sipped the liquid, he found a towel and started drying her

hair.

'What about you?' Lucy said. 'You must be cold, too.'

'I was made for this, remember.'

The wind howled outside and the fire roared in response. Silas finished rubbing Lucy's hair and sat down behind her, wrapping his arms around her torso, resting his head on her shoulder.

Once again, it was like the words had been waiting. 'What did she tell you?' she asked. 'The old woman in the hut?'

'I told you, just the lessons of the Piebald Man. The words that are passed on, that's all she told us.' She could feel him shrug. 'It was odd.'

'Tell me.'

'I don't –'

'They never told me,' Lucy said. 'All of this, all of us, my heritage. They were waiting for the right time and it never came.'

There was a long silence. Lucy didn't turn, didn't prompt or pester. She just sat there, watching the jumping flames. And then Silas began to speak.

'She told us that we are not like them. That we're all different, but we all share one common truth. We are not like them. We were made by them, by their scientists and magicians and alchemists. We were made to serve their purposes. And then we were forgotten. That's what she told us.'

He paused, hugging her tighter for a moment. 'When she said it, I suddenly understood. All the little routines we had; checking for SkyEyes, the way my mum brushed my hair for school. And then I looked at the other kids there. The thick skull, or long fingers, or eyes like quicklsilver. Things that no-one would notice, that no-one would see unless they already knew. It's how I knew you, back at the cove.'

She turned around to look at him, then pulled him closer and kissed him, long and soft. When they broke, she buried her head in his shoulder.

'You shouldn't have come in after me,' Lucy said. 'It's too dangerous, and I'm not-'

'Don't,' he said, hard and definite, cutting the thought off before she could say it aloud. 'You're worth it, you're worth anything.'

'But all those people, the SkyEyes –'

'I love you,' he said. 'I don't care who saw what or how, I was never going to let you go. I never will.' He lifted her face, met her eyes and smiled. 'You belong to me, and we belong together.'

When she fell asleep that night, Lucy had the same dream again. She was a

babe once more, her tiny fingers grasping one of her mother's, their eyes meeting and smiling, and her mother stroking her face. And this time, when her mother leaned in, Lucy finally heard what she was whispering.

You belong here. You belong to me.

iii.

It had been a Sunday morning when they first met, and it was a Sunday morning too when they first heard about the Sweepers.

Grey city light wept through their thin curtains. The kind of light they could just doze in. Curled up, limbs entwined, wrapped in the closeness of a lazy day.

There was noise in the house below, but that wasn't unusual. There were ten of them sharing a home built for four. It was all they could afford, but no-one had built houses for the poor in London for over fifty years, and, Silas and Lucy both knew, they'd been lucky to get the room at all.

If they'd paid attention, they might have realised there was something different. A rise and fall of conversation; bursts of chatter and shocked voices, long swathes of silence. But without context, it was ignored.

Then there was a fist at the door, Aisline's voice accompanying it, insistent. 'Oi! You two!' They ignored her. The fist again, her voice louder. 'Stop with the fucking and get up!'

Silas rolled over, sleepily glared at the door. 'We're sleeping, not fucking. Go away.'

'Promise you're not fucking?'

'We're not fucking,' Lucy said.

The door opened a crack and Aisline's face peered round. 'Then you can get up. You won't believe this.'

When they wandered downstairs, everyone was in the kitchen. Cups of tea and bowls of cereal ignored. Everyone was looking at where the grid was splashed against the wall between the cupboards. Smoke, fire engines and police cars squeezed between the pasta jars and the crockery.

'So what's the deal?' Silas asked. 'Someone shot the Prime Minister or something?'

Tony looked round, registering their presence, grinned. 'Oh no.'

Lucy looked at the picture, the smoke clearing. 'Is that Whitehall?'

'No,' Aisline said, bouncing on her toes. She was working an elastic band in the fingers of one hand, stretching it out and pinging it back. It was a habit they'd got used to; something she did to calm herself. 'It's further up. Just past the old parliament.'

‘So what’s going –’

‘Just wait. It’s on a loop, all over the grid.’

‘What’s –’

And then the smoke cleared, a blast of noise brushing it aside. Soldiers running, waving people back. Behind them were more troops, different troops in heavier uniforms and helmets. And in their midst, they saw him. Close to seven feet tall, he was dressed in a heavy winter coat. It disguised a little of his size, but there was no hiding his face. Like the rest of him, it was bulky and misshapen. The picture blurred for a moment as the camera zoomed in. Then they could see it close up. Mottled and lumpen skin. A body that was patched together, a life that shouldn’t have been lived.

Lucy had never seen him. He’d been gone long before she was born. And while her parents had never had the chance to pass his lessons on, she knew straight away who he was.

‘The Piebald Man,’ she said.

There were chains around his wrists and ankles. The troops were shepherding him forwards, blows from shock batons driving him on.

‘A terrorist or something,’ Tony said.

Mike nodded at the grid. ‘They found a whole roomful of them when they were cleaning the sewers. Some sort of hidden chamber.’

Tess glanced over. ‘Had to send in the army.’

The picture blurred again, pulling back and refocussing as something obscured the view. A military lifter, heavy with armour, settled down in the road, engines creating a whirlwind as it touched down.

The footage ended there, and the grid switched to Downing Street, with the heavy face of the Prime Minister outside the black door:

– At seven o’clock this morning, armed units responded to a request for help from the Metropolitan Police. No doubt by now, you have all seen the footage of what ensued. First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to thank those members of the armed forces and the police who helped contain this incident, and in doing so neutralise any threat posed to innocent members of the public. Investigations into the exact nature of this threat are continuing, and the –

Silas waved his hand, cutting the feed. He shook his head, ‘I can’t –’

Tony grinned, ‘Crazy mad, yeah?’ He clapped his hands together. ‘Who wants a tea?’

As the water boiled, Silas and Lucy slowly drifted back together. Fingers entwined, their eyes flicking back to the empty patch of wall where the grid had been.

‘What did you call it?’ Aisline asked. ‘That thing.’ She giggled, ‘The pie man or something?’

‘Piebald Man,’ Lucy answered.

Silas squeezed her hand, a sharp warning. ‘A story,’ he said. ‘You know, the kids’ story?’

Aisline’s face was blank, like Silas knew it would be. The Piebald Man was not a story she would have heard, not one any of them would have known, not the way they knew it. But he had to pretend. ‘Like the goats and troll?’ She shook her head, and he laughed. ‘Maybe it’s a Cornish thing. It’s just a story, Ais.’

And as they looked away, Lucy buried her face in his chest.

Just a story.

Later, in their room, Silas assured her they would be okay.

‘It happens. We’re all forgotten,’ he said. ‘They create, they throw away, they forget. And then, every so often, someone remembers.’

‘Not ‘they’,’ Lucy said. ‘‘Us’ or ‘we’. We’re no different from them.’

But in the weeks that followed, they weren’t forgotten. The Piebald Man was the start, not the end. Nothing reached the grid the way he had, but the heavy duty soldiers were given a name, the Sweepers. And they continued to be seen. Occasional sightings in the early hours of the morning or late at night, armed figures, organised in the shadows.

Lucy doubted if even half these accounts were actually real. Once people had seen something on the grid, they wanted to see it in real life, too, whether it was there or not.

And it wasn’t just the Sweepers, it was what they were hunting.

There were cells of outcasts, the Prime Minister said. The size and intentions of the network were uncertain, but they had to be identified and contained.

The language was familiar enough, but the exact nature of this threat was never pinned down. The vacuum was filled with whispers across the socials: there were things moving among them. Most of them hid in abandoned factories or housing projects, some in sewers, some slept rough. Twisted images of humanity.

The whole house piled down to the river one summer afternoon, sharing a couple of bags of wine between them down by the Thames. Everyone had a theory. Ais thought they were aliens; working the elastic band back and forth as she expounded on her theory. Sasha said they were foreign agents. Tony reckoned they were mutations.

Silas laughed at that one. ‘I saw the film,’ he said.

Tony’s face went red. ‘So what do you reckon, then?’ he snorted.

‘I don’t think they’re anything,’ Mike said. ‘It’s a meme. A joke. A load of stupid

nonsense, and I need to worry about where the rent's coming from, not trivia.'

Tony jabbed a finger at him. 'You won't be saying that when they crawl out of the sewers.'

'Really?' Mike sat back, confident. 'Apart from that thing in Westminster, no-one's seen one, have they?'

'You see the Sweepers, though,' Aisline said. 'And there are stories. Mo says they're keeping it quiet so as not to scare people.'

'Yeah. Well, given that everyone has a theory about it, I'd say they're doing a pretty bad job. You'd all jump at your own shadow if you thought it was one of them.'

Aisline looked at Silas and Lucy. 'What about you two? What do you think?'

They looked at each other, then Lucy shrugged. 'Maybe they're just people.'

'Bleeding heart,' Tony muttered.

'I think Aisline's got it,' Silas said. 'It's hearsay, not facts.'

They laughed, and they drank, and they staggered home.

The Sweepers came for them three days later. There was no noise. The lock was burnt in the night. Gas released. The house slept. And when they woke in the morning, Silas and Lucy were gone.

They weren't alone in their confusion. Across the country, there were others who found their friends had vanished, lovers who woke to an empty bed, and husbands and wives who were suddenly single once more, wondering what had happened to the lives they knew.

iv.

It was on his fourth day in the Stockade that Silas found the Piebald Man.

They were far underground, and there was no light or space. The Stockade wasn't even a prison, or at least, not like any prison Silas had seen or imagined.

It was a network of tunnels, hewn from bare rock. There were rooms of a sort in places, but mostly it was just tunnels and passages, with bare bulbs strung from the walls. Any exit was sealed by armoured doors and reinforced by the presence of Sweepers.

Silas knew within moments what had happened. There'd been the shock of his surroundings – the uncomfortable clothes, the hard rock where a bed should have been – but then he'd found the faces of the other people around him. It was the same recognition of equals he'd had that night in the hut, only this time there was no wonder or secret truth.

For the most part, they all told the same story. They'd gone to sleep, and when they'd woken they were in the Stockade.

It was dry and hot and damp and dusty, all at the same time.

And Lucy wasn't there.

He roamed the galleries, checking every corner he could find, asking every Sweeper he found.

'Her name's Alicia Léon,' he said. 'She calls herself Lucy. About five foot three, auburn hair and grey eyes. My age. Would have arrived in the past couple of days.'

Every time it was the same; just stoic glances, if he received any response at all.

As the hours turned to days, Silas worked his way down through the Stockade. The lower levels were more sparsely populated – further away from the food and water, further away from the surface and the hope of daylight – but there were a few places left for him to check.

If he'd thought about it, he would have realised there was something unusual about the presence of the Sweepers. They were scattered about the Stockade in pairs at doors and intersections, but in four days he'd hardly ever seen more than two or three together. Here, there were at least eight, spread out along the passageway.

'I'm looking for a girl,' Silas said to the first.

No answer.

'Please,' he said, 'she would have come in in the last week. I just want to –'

'You won't get anything from them.'

The voice was deep and loud, echoing down the tunnel.

Silas looked around, unable to see the source. He glanced between the Sleepers, but there was no response. He moved on, cautiously, edging down the corridor. 'Hello?' he called.

There was an alcove towards the end of the passage, invisible from the far end. And there, sat on the floor in one corner, was the figure they'd seen on the grid that morning.

He wore the same uniform as Silas, as all the others, but it was obvious it hadn't been adjusted for him. It was too short and so tight across his chest that he couldn't even close it. It look awkward and undignified, but that, Silas supposed, was part of the point.

The Piebald Man looked up, studying Silas.

'You know where you are?' he asked.

'I know,' Silas said.

The Piebald Man nodded his head, back up the corridor. 'It's just you sounded like a crazy person.' He held a hand up. 'No shame in it if you are. You wouldn't be the first.' He waved his hand. 'This whole place is someone's idea of a joke.

‘The Stockade’. A stockade’s a bloody fence to keep wild animals out. Something for the open plains.’ He looked past Silas, his voice gaining volume, addressing the Sweepers outside, ‘But I don’t see any fucking zebras, do you?’

He let the words fade, waiting for a moment, just in case there was a response, and then, when it didn’t come, closed his eyes and leant back into the corner.

‘What are you doing down here?’ Silas asked.

The Piebald Man laughed. ‘Getting away from it all. Too many hangers-on on the higher levels. They mean well, but I’ve had enough disciples over the years.’ He paused, looking at Silas again. ‘But you’re not that.’

‘I just…’ Silas started to reply, but the words faded. He suddenly felt lost again. ‘This place,’ he said, ‘It’s not what I…’ But his voice trailed away. He shook his head, ‘No, that’s not right.’

‘This isn’t what you thought it would be like.’ The Piebald Man smiled, ‘Because you didn’t like to think of it at all.’

‘Yes.’ Silas sat down, not quite able to look at the Piebald Man any more. ‘This many people? It must have been happening for weeks and we… We didn’t want to see it.’ He shook his head. ‘We should have run. That Sunday, when they came for you, we should have run.’

‘Piss on that,’ the Man said.

Silas blinked.

‘Piss on all that,’ he repeated. ‘Piss on your guilt and your should-haves and could-haves. None of us thought. None of us expected. This place, the Sweepers, all of it. It was all just stories, right up until it wasn’t. We were hiding from them when they were hiding from us. So, we’re all stupid birds with our heads in the dirt. So fucking what.’

‘You’re not what I expected.’

‘Ha!’ the Piebald Man snorted, ‘I’m old enough to have been everything you ever expected and more.’ He sighed. ‘You were looking for someone? A girl?’

Silas nodded.

The Piebald Man beckoned him over, and when Silas was in front of him, he reached out to pull his ear forward. Releasing it a moment later, he nodded. ‘Aqua breather. That’s why you’re here.’

‘Because I’m a Story.’

‘Because you’re a fact. You’re here because they already know everything about you. It’s the ones they don’t know they care about. Which means whatever she is, they want to find out.’

Silas looked at the floor, his resolve crumbling. When he looked up, the Piebald Man was different again. All the bluster was gone, because he could see what was

driving Silas.

'Where is she?' Silas asked.

'She's your friend?'

'No,' Silas said. 'She's… my life.'

'Whatever she is, she's being kept a long way from here.'

'I don't –'

'They know about you. It's not a long lineage. Your line goes back maybe a century or so?'

Silas knew. The lineage was important. Never forget your beginnings, the truth behind your Story. His was military. Early genetic modifications, trying to breed swimmers for secret operations in some war. What war, his parents had told him, didn't matter, because there would always be a war. And his grandparents had known what they were and what would happen when their usefulness was at an end, and so they had fled the moment they hit open water.

'I know it.'

'As do I. Your friend, though…' He paused. 'What does she do?'

'She…' Silas stopped himself, shook his head. 'That's not how this works, you know that.'

The Piebald Man smiled again, intoned, 'We only tell our own stories.'

'Yes,' Silas answered.

'And who do you think came up with that idea, all those years ago?' The Piebald Man sighed. 'It was a way of keeping us safe. Fucking genius. Look where it got us.'

He reached over and laid a hand on Silas' shoulder. 'You said she was your life.'

'Yes.'

'Then you need to start thinking differently. Because whatever she is, whatever she was to you, she's gone.'

v.

'Do you remember what you told me?' Lucy asked. 'That evening, after you pulled me from the water?'

Silas said nothing, just tilted his head, waiting.

Lucy smiled, a thin smile, but she couldn't think about that moment without feeling its warmth. 'You belong to me. That's what you said. It's…' She faltered for a moment, then looked at him once more. 'It's the same thing my mother used to tell me.'

The cell was comfortable enough. Old brick arches butted up against a steel wash

basin and toilet, and a bed sat in a corner, covered by a handful of blankets.

After a few days of solitary confinement, a pair of Sweepers escorted her upstairs. It was all corridors and closed doors, but Lucy saw enough to know the kind of place she was. Traces of gold leaf, wooden floors polished to gleaming, ornate plasterworks hugging the ceiling. A country house of some sort, whose cellar had been adapted to serve as a jail. At one point, a door had been left open and Lucy caught a glimpse of a heavy desk in front of a large window; beyond it, landscaped grasses and a long row of trees in the mist.

A snatched glimpse of the outside world.

And then the door was shut and they moved on.

The laboratory had been a hall once upon a time. There was more gold, even grander plasterwork, faded murals glimpsed in archways. Lucy could imagine it had once held long dining tables or hosted dances, with grand dresses swirling around stiff-backed men as violins played.

It wasn't like that now, though.

Machines lined the walls, heavily built and awkward looking, reeking of oil and ozone, thick snakes of cable coiled at their feet. At the far end, some twenty metres away, there was a desk; a bank of computer screens neatly arrayed on it, and behind them a woman, checking papers.

She was in her fifties, Lucy guessed, with clean and buoyant grey hair framing her face. The hair was, Lucy thought, the best thing about the face. She looked tired, as though something important had been forgotten or worn out of her.

After a few minutes the woman put the papers to one side, and got to her feet.

'Good morning,' she said. 'My name is September.'

Lucy looked around her, glancing between the two Sweepers. September inclined her head, indicating she was waiting for a response.

'I'm… Lucy,' she said.

September nodded. 'You know why you're here?'

'I haven't done anything wrong,' Lucy said.

September's mouth twitched; a half-smile of disappointment.

'This isn't a courtroom,' September said. 'There's no right or wrong, no guilt or innocence. This is a place for science, and in here, I deal only in facts and evidence.'

She waited, and Lucy nodded her understanding.

September smiled. 'Good.'

She brought a grid to life on the wall behind Lucy. Pictures slowly began to cycle across it. Men and woman in old-fashions; heavy glass tubes; broiling liquids; syringes; clipboards full of papers.

‘You are one member of a subset of humanity. A collection made up of scientifically augmented life-forms.’

Long hospital wards; petri dishes and microscopes; syringes and mechanics; women, all heavily pregnant. And then babies, rows upon rows of basinets and newborns.

‘This collection is comprised of the descendants of any number of projects from hundreds of years of research and experimentation. Many of you can pass freely among us. You are made in our image, but our nature is not your nature.’ The picture changed one last time: Whitehall, the Piebald Man in chains, smoke and confusion. ‘And your nature has always been to rebel.’

Lucy shook her head, ‘That’s not what –’

‘No,’ September said, a flat denial. She switched the grid off, returning her full attention to Lucy. ‘Facts, evidence. Your cabal has been growing in size for decades, possibly centuries, living in stealth, waiting for your moment to strike. A moment we have now denied you.’

Lucy looked at September, not quite believing the words she could hear.

‘I’ve no wish to upset you,’ September said. ‘I simply wanted to be clear at the outset. We know what you are, so there is no hiding. You are here to assist our understanding of your kind.’ She checked one of the papers on the desk. ‘I also need to explain something to you.’ September looked back at Lucy, and waved her hand. ‘When you were brought here, you were given an injection. A toxin was introduced to your body. It’s a standard procedure for all your kind.’

She paused, brushed a single strand of hair back into place. ‘There are microwave emitters around this complex whose sole purpose is to keep that toxin inert. Without those transmitters, it would activate. Try to leave –’

‘Escape,’ Lucy said.

And was a brief moment then; a flicker of something behind September’s eyes.

‘Try to leave,’ she repeated, ‘and your body will eat itself the moment you’re out of range.’

‘What could I possibly –’

‘You could run,’ September smiled. ‘That’s what you do, isn’t it?’

They returned her to her cell after that.

Up to that point, Lucy had felt a sliver of hope. But September had changed that.

To begin with, her depiction of the Stories had thrown Lucy off-balance. There’d been truth to it, yes, but it had been so crude and reductive. As if their lives, their history could be reduced to a series of pictures and a handful of words. Watching September’s slideshow was like being confronted with an ever-widening

chasm, eating the ground beneath her.

Was this really it? Was this how they saw them?

Then there had been the flicker of irritation when Lucy had spoken.

It wasn't, Lucy realised, that September liked the sound of her own voice. It was more she liked the story she was telling. Leave implied a guest, but escape said a prisoner, and a prisoner made September into a jailor. The irritation was in the challenge to how September saw herself and the world.

That certainty frightened her more than anything else. More than anything, it told Lucy just how much power September had over her. It bolted her to a here and now that threatened to overwhelm her.

As she laid on the bed, Lucy stared up at the ancient plaster clinging to the arched ceiling. Her eyes found a collection of hairline cracks, twists and jagged lengths, cutting across each other. That night, she let her eyes chase them until they grew heavy and, finally, she slept.

It became a routine over the following days.

In the mornings she would be taken to September in her lab. Sometimes there would be tests, bloodwork or a cardiac trace or a tissue sample. Most days though, September just wanted her to run between those pillars of industrial metal.

Then, when the running was done, she would be brought back to the cell. And Lucy would lie on her bed, look at the ceiling once more, and escape.

It was no longer the cracks she looked at, though.

There was something Mike had talked about, weeks back. Aisline had been struggling to remember the code for her office, the elastic band flicking back and forth in agitation, and Mike had tried to help. A mind palace, he'd called it. You built a house in your imagination, and you filled the rooms with your memories. Then, when you wanted to remember something, you closed your eyes and went to the right room, and you'd find it. Aisline had rolled her eyes at the idea, and so had Lucy, and they'd both laughed.

But while Lucy still couldn't imagine building a house inside her head, mapping her memories onto the cracks was easy enough. And so, when her eyes traced their patterns, she'd remember and she'd be somewhere else.

Schooldays were over there. Family Christmases were the spur to the right. The long throughline down the middle was Silas.

Watching him in the cove, slipping through the water. Walking home from the fireworks at New Year, hand in hand, the first time they'd kissed. The day they'd buried her parents, and he'd wrapped her in a blanket and stroked her hair till she fell asleep. Their first days in London, with the sun on the Thames and walks

in the parks.

It kept him with her and it kept him safe.

Lucy would trace him on the ceiling, then close her eyes, screwing them tight, breathing deep.

'You were right,' she'd tell him. 'We belong together.'

And when she opened her eyes, it was like he was there in the room with her. He was never in the same place twice, but every night she would find him. There in the plasterwork, or in the shadows in the corner of the room, or in the echo of a footstep in the corridor outside.

She found him and she no longer felt alone.

September made her run almost every day.

Lucy would start at one end of the ballroom, then walk to the other, passing between the pillars. The process would be repeated, over and over, slowly picking up the pace each time. Fast like an ordinary human, but never fast enough to feel the wind on her face.

Sometimes September would ask her questions, about her childhood, about her family. Where had they come from? The paperwork was strangely incomplete.

That puzzled Lucy. Those Stories who could live in public had always been careful. Their true histories were never written down, only spoken. But the facts they laid down in the System were their public face. No-one was ever careless; every form was filled, every tax paid, every declaration made. Nothing to hide, whiter than white, no cause for suspicion. It was how they survived.

After a couple of weeks, September summoned Lucy to the laboratory, flanked by a pair of Sweepers. She smiled, 'You've been holding back.'

Lucy shook her head, 'I've tried. I –'

September didn't even sigh. A grid came to life on the wall behind her.

'It took a long while,' September said, 'but we found you.'

Lucy's first instinct was to keep her eyes forward, not to play. But the grid flickered, movement and colour. It was too much not to look.

Green fields, clifftops, and coastline skimmed below. This, Lucy realised, was the world the SkyEyes saw. The images rolled out for a few seconds, then slowed, stopped. For the most part, it was anonymous countryside, but Lucy knew the rocky cove in the bottom right corner too well.

September smiled, 'You were very careful. But the SkyEyes see all.'

There was a figure, small, dashing across the fields. Silas, so many years ago. Another figure came into view, chasing after him, a long way behind. The screen froze.

The grass underfoot. The faint taste of sea salt on the air. Church bells in the distance. A Sunday morning. The wind on her face, calling to her.

The image clicked on. The figure on the screen was gone. And then she was there, at his side.

'The SkyEyes see all, but they're not infallible.' September pointed at the timestamp on the screen. 'Fifteen years and five months ago. You see the red mark next to it?'

Lucy looked at the grid, then back to September. There was something different about her face now. A determination that made Lucy fearful.

'That's an error stamp. It marks a glitch in the surveillance feed.' She touched the remote control. 'Like someone being in two places at once.'

The image rewound, but slower. Broken down into tinier fragments of time. September pressed the control again, and the image froze. There was Lucy, running after Silas, but on the other side of the screen she was already at his side.

'It's just one hundredth of a second,' September said, 'but there you are. No more secrets.' She stepped forward, taking Lucy's chin and lifting it up so she couldn't avoid her gaze. 'The next time I ask you to run, you'll run. Do we have an understanding?'

Lucy held the gaze for as long as she was able, but it wasn't enough. She snatched her face away. She didn't want September's hands on her any more.

September shook her head in disappointment, and the Sweepers took Lucy back to her cell.

It felt cold and hard and somehow even smaller than it had before. For a moment, Lucy just stood there, then she climbed onto her cot and waited for night, for Silas to come.

She found him in motes of dust, his profile dancing in and out of the light around the door frame. The Silas on the grid had been him, his arms and hair and skin. A snapshot, perfectly preserved. But the glimpses of him Lucy caught in the dust felt more true.

She smiled. 'I suppose that's me losing my mind, isn't it?'

Silas said nothing, he just waited for her.

Lucy took a deep breath. 'She wants me to run,' she explained. 'September does. It's what she said the first time I met her. Run, that's what you do, isn't it?'

She curled up, hugging her legs tight, thinking about that moment September had shown her.

'I must have gone to the cove hundreds of times as a kid. And I knew, every time, I had to be careful. Because the SkyEyes could always catch you out, but…'

She looked at him, and he nodded his head, like he knew what she was about

to say, like he remembered it too.

'That could have been any day. But it wasn't.

'It was a Sunday morning in the spring, and you'd knocked on our door. You were thirteen then, and I was just coming up on twelve. And there was a high tide and you were in a hurry, because you just wanted to be in the water.

'So I held back. Making you run and wait, over and over.

'And then, one time, you looked back and saw me and you smiled, because you knew the game I was playing.'

Lucy laid down, closed her eyes, remembering, losing herself to the memory.

'And that's when I knew. This wasn't friendship. I wanted to be close to you, to see that smile in your eyes, to touch your face and grab your hand and never let go. I needed to be at your side.

'So I ran to you.'

Lucy reached a hand out, reaching for where she knew he'd be.

She'd never thought about how it was that she ran before. Her parents had taught her to be careful, yes, but beyond that it was just something that happened, that had always happened.

You run, Silas whispered. You just feel the wind, and you run.

And it was true. Even in this tiny space, if she thought about it, she could still feel the wind on her face, just like it had been in the fields. Calling to her.

You just feel the wind, and you run.

'But what is it I do?' she asked.

Think about it, he told her. Remember.

And Lucy thought again about that day. The shake of his head and the smile, the way the sunlight had caught his eyes, the curve of his lips, and more than anything, the need she had felt to be next to him.

'I needed to be with you,' she said. 'Needed it so badly, I could almost see myself there.'

And now, thinking about, Lucy realised what had happened all those years ago. That in the moment of seeing herself at his side, she'd suddenly been there.

Lucy opened her eyes, looking at the corner of the cell. In the shadows by the arch, she could almost pick out Silas' shape.

She stripped the case from her pillow, folded it over, and after a moment's hesitation, tied it around her head.

Sitting on the cot, she thought about the corner, about Silas, about running to him, feeling the wind carry her on.

And just for a moment, the world changed.

She could feel the pressure on her thighs where she sat on the cot, the blindfold

was there on her face, her eyes lost to the dark. But in that instant, she was also in front of the wall, her hands reaching out to him in the shadows.

And then the world snapped back into place. That glimpse of the wall was swallowed by the blindfold, but it didn't matter. She was standing not sitting, and could feel the weight of her body on the soles of her feet and the old brickwork under her fingertips, and she knew she wasn't where she had been.

Lucy's pulled the blindfold from her face.

Silas wasn't there, but she was in the corner where she'd pictured him, reaching out the way she'd wanted.

She turned around, playing with the blindfold in her hands.

She thought about the instant where she'd regained her sight, where she'd seen the wall as the wind called her on.

That glimpse was a lover's hand the first time it was laid upon you. The coolness of fingertips against the warmth of your skin. A sudden intake of breath. Another body tracing its way over yours, learning new ground, exploring and teasing as you respond in kind.

A choice, a moment of decision and commitment, and once you were committed to it, an irresistible force drawing you on.

She thought of the elastic band in Aisline's hand, pulled tight, snapping between her fingers.

vi.

Day by day, the atmosphere was changing inside the Stockade.

The first weeks the Stories had been divided between despair and optimism. The division wasn't uniform, but the broad pattern had been clear enough to see. For those who had been forced to keep to the shadows all their lives, this felt like the end; for the others, who had spent their lives among the general population, this felt like a mistake that would soon be corrected.

But as the time drew on, their optimism was worn down, and despair turned to frustration and anger.

Silas was eating breakfast with Imogen and a couple of the Sliders. Pre-prepared food came in vats wheeled through security doors that sealed shut afterwards, and the dining room wasn't much more than a large hollow with benches and tables bolted to the floor. But it was still a large enough space for Stories to gather, and the only spot where their numbers might count against the Sweepers. If their prison had a weak spot, this was it.

'I'd sell my history for a real coffee,' Imogen said.

Silas shook his head with a smile. Imogen's complaints had become a morning

ritual. ‘No, you wouldn’t,’ he countered.

‘True,’ she said. ‘But I might sell yours.’

The Sliders laughed at that. Silas returned his attention to the scrambled egg before him, already losing its heat, and picked at its mass with his spoon. A few moments later, he lifted his head. The murmur of conversation had shifted, a ripple spreading across the room. A handful of Beast Folk had entered, were slowly skirting around the room towards the steaming vats. The Sweepers had noticed them too, slowly adjusting their posture. Silas’ eyes flicked back to the entrance. He couldn’t see anything there, but…

‘Time to go,’ he said.

‘But it’s breakfast,’ the Sliders said.

Silas looked at Imogen and shook his head. She glanced around and saw the Beast Folk, understood. ‘Time to go,’ she agreed.

They shepherded the Sliders away from the table, back towards the tunnels. As they neared the entrance, there was a burst of noise behind them and another set of Beast Folk emerged out of the dark in front.

Silas pushed the Sliders’ heads down, hurrying them to the entrance as shots fired behind them.

‘Get out!’ Silas told them. ‘Get out!’

They hit the tunnels just in time.

It wasn’t the first time someone had tried to storm the gates in the dining room, and they’d all heard the stories of what had happened. As they passed the threshold, Silas looked over his shoulder. The Beast Folk had killed at least one Sweeper and were attacking another. The remaining soldiers were regrouping and rearming, just in case, but it wasn’t necessary.

There were other Stories who hadn’t seen the signs, caught unawares by the Beast Folk. Some of them were still by their tables, caught in that moment of shock and confusion. Others knew what was coming and were running for the exit. And on the faces of a few others, there was a snapshot of peace and relief; the knowledge that this would all be over.

And it was.

There was an electric thunk as the emitters were shut down inside the hall. And moments later, every Story on the other side of the threshold was dead.

Silas walked Imogen and the Sliders back to their cot beds. The Stockade was quiet, the news spreading fast.

‘You should rest,’ Imogen told him.

Silas shook his head, smiled, ‘Things to do.’

Imogen nodded. She knew his routine. Every morning, scouting the Stockade,

asking the same question. Her name is Alicia Léon. She calls herself Lucy. Every morning, the same blank faces, giving the same answer.

At first, it seemed to Silas as though the Piebald Man had many courtiers. It was only when he realised that he had become one of them that he understood how wrong that impression was. The Piebald Man never slept, and he liked to talk. His difficulty, Silas realised, was finding the right audience. Too many of the Stories were in awe of him, and the Piebald Man didn't have time for any of them. There were a handful of people he liked to talk to, though, and Silas had become one of their number.

As the weeks had passed, Silas came to realise that slowly, delicately, the Piebald Man was picking through Silas' childhood, his friends and family, the day he'd met Lucy, and all the days after.

Silas was approaching the end of his morning circuit when he found him. In the lower galleries, standing in a darkened corner, his head bowed against the low ceiling. His eyes were shut, his hands out to either side, pressed against the bare rockface.

'Master Silas,' the Piebald Man said.

His eyes hadn't opened and Silas said nothing. A faint smile creased the Piebald Man's patchwork face. 'You have a distinctive footstep. All the Breathers do.' He opened his eyes, finding Silas immediately. 'You're not made for land. Even less for the depths like these.'

'What about you?' Silas responded. 'What were you made for?'

The Piebald Man laughed at that, removing his hands from the rock and massaging his fingers together.

'You have a blunt mouth.'

'We tried subtlety for hundreds of years. It didn't get us very far.'

'Blunt action isn't helping either.'

There was a brief flicker of pain on the Piebald Man's face. He'd heard about the dining room attack, Silas realised. In fact, had probably known about it before it happened – someone would have asked for consent that wasn't given.

The Piebald Man looked at Silas for a long moment, then walked off down the gallery, beckoning Silas to follow him.

They moved off through shadows and uneven floors. Silas was constantly watching his step, but even though he was a foot taller and twice as awkward, the Piebald Man never broke stride. He would reach out occasionally, his fingers tracing along the walls on either side. Eventually, he slowed to a halt, and his fingers lingered a long time over one butt of rock, slowly tracing its surface. And

when he was done, he turned to Silas with a sigh.

'We prize memory above all. The moments are the things that define us, that shape who we are, yes? Your swim that morning, where you saw her for the first time. You've built your life around that point, I think.'

Silas said nothing. Lucy was still too raw, an absence that threated to consume him.

The Piebald Man nodded. 'It's alright. I understand. A long time since I had a lay, but I haven't completely forgotten love.' He paused. 'But there's a lot that's gone. Most of it, I think.' He tapped Silas' forehead. 'What I'm trying to tell you is this: your memory is not infinite. You remember being a child?'

'Yes.'

'How long was a day back then? Or a week?'

Silas shrugged. 'A long time.'

'And a month would feel like a year, and a year an eternity.'

'Time gets quicker as you get older.'

'No, it doesn't.' The Piebald Man shook his head. 'It's just your memory gets crowded. When you're young, there's not so much to store. So the details fill your mind. Time doesn't speed up as you get older. It's just your brain can't hold the detail. The space isn't there.'

'What's the point of this?'

The Piebald Man said nothing then. Instead, he paused and frowned, tilting his head. Silas turned, looking back along the gallery, but he could see nothing. When he turned back, the frown was gone.

'I may be getting old,' the Piebald Man said. 'I keep hearing things that aren't there.'

'What things?'

'Young voices. Children playing, maybe. It doesn't matter.' The Piebald Man reached out, brushing the same section of rock once more. 'You were asking about me, about subtlety, about how we ended up here. And the answer is that I've lived a very long time, master Silas. More than one lifetime. More than I can count.' He smiled, 'And that tells you everything you want to know.'

Then he nodded his head and walked off into the dark.

Silas watched him go, still unsure of the conversation they'd just had. The audience was at an end, but equally he had no desire to return to the upper galleries just yet.

As he leant back against the wall, Silas' eyes settled on the butt opposite where the Piebald Man had laid his hand. There were patterns in the rock. Some rough, some smooth. Veins of colour here and there. And there, at the far edge, a clean

line, marking the strike of a hammer on chisel.

vii.

They'd seen her. There were bound to be Eyes in her cell, so of course they'd seen her.

'What were you doing?' September asked her.

Lucy met her grey eyes. It was the first time in weeks she'd not felt like she needed to keep her head bowed. She kept her face neutral, though, and any hint of defiance out of her voice.

'I think I'd forgotten,' Lucy said. 'You wanted me to run, to really run, and…' She gestured at the greasy banks of machinery. 'And it's hard to concentrate here. I hadn't done it for so many years, it was almost like a dream.'

'But now you've remembered?'

'Yes. I think so.'

September held Lucy's gaze. There wasn't a shred of emotion on her face, but after so many days, Lucy felt she could read the woman anyway. September had been expecting surprise and contrition, maybe fear, but Lucy had offered her none of those things. And now September was trying to work out what that meant.

Lucy met the stare a moment longer, then, to be safe, flicked her eyes away and let her head drop, just a little.

September was silent a few moments longer, then nodded. 'Good. Now you can run for me.'

Lucy did as she was told. Backwards and forwards along the length of the laboratory, in between the columns, breathing the metallic tang of the air, the constant low buzz of power. With every step, the machines hummed, watching her, reading everything they could about her and the room she moved through.

September had known, long before Lucy, what it was that she did. The SkyEyes had shown her. It was why she was here, rather than wherever Silas and the others were held. She wanted Lucy to run.

It had always been the dynamic of their relationship, but that day it became clear in a way it hadn't before: she was a puzzle and September wanted the key that would solve it.

But it was weeks before Lucy realised why, and Silas had to die before the answer came to her.

'I don't think I really run at all,' Lucy told Silas. 'At least, not how it looks. The movement… it's like a side effect.'

He was there in shadow that night, a pattern flickering in the light against the

brickwork. Insubstantial, but somehow more solid to her as a result. A presence she could feel, so close it hurt not to actually reach out and touch him.

'You remember the way Ais used to play with that rubber band? Pulling it out, snapping it between her fingers, right?' Lucy paused, trying to conjure the feeling as she ran. 'That's what happens. It's like my mind and body are different things, and when I run, I see myself somewhere. I push my mind there, and then my body snaps after it.'

She looked over to where Silas waited.

'I don't think I belong here,' she said. 'I don't think I ever have.'

In addition to thinking about how she ran, other moments had been clawing at her.

The perfect memories of her dreams.

Only there were things – moments - which Lucy felt sure she had no memory of. The detail on a schoolfriend's dress. The seeds on a freshly baked loaf. The mobile that hung over her cot. And in her dreams, she recalled every detail, every spoken word. And it felt solid and real, not dreamlike at all.

Then there was the memory that had come to her after her parents had died, one she must have returned to dozens of times since.

Her mother, holding her to her breast, stroking her face. You belong to me. It should have been simple, a comforting reassurance to a babe who knew only the tone and not the words. But to the Lucy who dreamed, it sounded different. Whenever she found herself in that moment, her sense of the words had changed.

'I thought it was a plea,' Lucy said, then stopped. She looked down at her hands, thinking of Ais again. 'But it wasn't that. It's an anchor, keeping me here.'

She looked at Silas. How could she explain it to him?

September had her running more than she'd done in years, more than she'd ever done in solid bursts. Her skill had always been kept secret, something to be snatched at in moments, not something she'd ever repeated over and over.

It had enabled her to think about what happened in a way that she never had before.

And she realised that, caught in this place, she only ever felt at home when she running. The spaces between the moments that she slipped though, that was where she lived.

The wind was on her face and all the moments she'd ever known were there, flashing by, too quick for her to catch hold of. Shards of light and splinters of touch and sensation, whirling around and through her. Then a moment would coalesce, the one she'd seen herself in at the start of the process, and her body would catch up.

‘There’s a pull, though. It’s like…’ Lucy took a deep breath, ‘Those currents that I feel, there’s a part of me that just wants to dive in, to get swept away. But there’s always something that calls me back.

‘When I was small, it was my mum.’ She looked at the shadow and smiled. ‘And now, it’s you.’

It seemed like Silas moved in response. For a moment, the head tilted and the air seemed to shimmer around it, his hand reaching out towards her, trailing splinters of light.

‘Silas?’ Lucy breathed, not quite believing, her own fingers stretching out to join with his.

September, he urged.

And then he was gone.

Everything changed in that instant.

Because he’d been there. Lucy hadn’t been imagining that. He’d been there, he’d reached for her, spoken to her, and then he’d gone.

There was an answer to that, but it wasn’t something Lucy wanted to think about. Because that would mean he really was gone.

Then there was what he’d said.

Lucy could move forward though moments when she was awake and willed it, would return to moments in the past when she gave herself to the currents in her sleep. But, until Silas had said it, she’d become so lost in her own discovery that Lucy had somehow forgotten about September. Or, at least, forgotten about her intentions.

Lucy was a puzzle to be unlocked, but why?

Now, thinking about it, a new fear grew inside her. The bulky industrial towers, reading every moment as she ran between them, clawing at every scrap of information, trying to unlock that puzzle.

And if she did, what then? What would become of that information, that power? If she could replicate it, would someone like September see the beauty of all those moments?

She knew the answer. It had been there in their very first conversation.

Try to leave.

Escape.

Try to leave, and your body will eat itself the moment you’re out of range.

The certainty that hid behind those words terrified her now. There was no joy or freedom, just a rigid, unbending view that would never change. Unfettered from living moment to moment, what would that view do to everything stretched

out before it?

Impose. Demand. Rewrite.

She had been running between those pillars for weeks, streams of data collecting around September. How much more would it take?

She thought of Silas reaching out for her.

Your body will eat itself the moment you're out of range.

It was almost time to run.

viii.

The Sliders were still refusing to go to the dining room. Silas left them with Imogen and went to collect what food he could carry. What was left of the Beast Folk had long been cleared away, and there were a handful of Stories eating at the tables. And there, on the far side of the room, the Piebald Man was sat alone.

.Silas began to walk over, only for a woman to catch his arm. She shook her head, 'He wants to be alone. He's paying homage to our dead.' Silas just snorted with laughter at that and pulled his arm free, walking on.

There was a brief hush as he approached the Piebald Man, the weight of their stares on his back. The Man looked at Silas, then glared at the other tables. 'You can all turn your eyes back where they were.'

Silas settled down on the bench opposite him, and waited.

'Well?' the Piebald Man asked.

'You don't remember who you are,' Silas said. 'You're hundreds of years old. And after all that time, the space isn't there.'

'I think I knew, once.' He tapped the side of his head. 'I can't see it anymore. Like you said, it's got too small or too far away or some fucking thing. But it's gone now. A picture defined by its absence.'

'Only you found a history. In the stories they told about you.'

The Piebald Man nodded. 'So many different tales. Forbidden knowledge. Tragedy, fire. Spark of life, sin of murder.'

'You found yourself in stories.'

'I remember finding that damn book. And I knew, that wasn't me. It was an echo. Someone must have remembered. Someone who was there, or someone I told. A sentence, a whisper. The piebald man, put together from the dead. A story, slowly growing and gaining form.' He paused, looked at Silas. 'Why do stories have power? Why do they endure?'

'Because they entertain.'

The Piebald Man shook his head, a hint of a smile. 'No, not because of that. Because of what they teach us. And yes, they taught me about myself.' He took a

deep breath, sighed. ‘I was alone a long time. Hiding in shadows, running from place to place.

‘And when I found I wasn’t alone, it was a relief and a fear.

‘Because the people who made me, they weren’t ready for me. And the people who made the Beast Folk and the Breathers and the Synthetics, they weren’t ready for them either. So we hid, in our own different ways and places, and we disappeared from history except as those echoes. The whispers that became folk stories that became legend.’

‘You hoped they would spread. That they would teach the others about us.’

‘That we weren’t to be feared,’ he said. ‘And that was my mistake.’

Silas fell silent then, pulling at the collar of his uniform, breathing air that was stale and warm and damp all at the same time. Yes, he thought, it was a mistake. Because narrative needed villains, and in mankind’s outcasts, they had been all too easily found.

The fictions hadn’t let them blend in. It had made them the unknown, the thing to be feared and fought against.

Silas nodded towards the other inmates, still casting glances towards the, ‘They thought you were paying homage to the dead.’

‘I wanted some soup.’

‘People died here. Right here. You don’t seem worried.’

The Piebald Man ‘The future takes care of itself, always has.’

‘What future? We’re lost.’

‘You think?’ the Piebald Man said. ‘We all go to dust in the end. So one day, we really will live only as stories.’ He smiled. ‘And just think how powerful we’ll be then.’

He got up then, moving over to the other tables, laying hands on the group who’d been anxiously waiting. Silas watched for a few moments, then collected some bread and juice and left.

The Piebald Man continued to confound him.

He felt it as he moved back along the gallery; a change in the air and the hint of a breeze. He stopped and slowly turned, wondering if he’d imagined it. But no, it was there. A clean scent, not the musty damp of the rock or the stale odours of people crowded together.

Silas almost dropped the food, closing his eyes, breathing deep.

Despite himself, he began to laugh.

It was only as that laughter faded that he heard the sounds being carried on the breeze. Screams, running feet, and gunshots.

ix.

Lucy paced back and forth in her cell that morning, fearful that all her realisations had come too late, that this morning the door wouldn't open. But it did, on schedule, as always, the Sweepers standing there, waiting.

As they beckoned her forwards, Lucy looked up at one of them, finding her face in the sheen of his black mask. 'What day is it?' she asked.

There was silence for a moment, then a muffled reply, 'It's Sunday.'

'Thank you,' Lucy said, and stepped between them. She had no idea how far she needed to go. How long was her leash? A few hundred metres? She shook her head. It didn't matter, she just needed to run until she was out of range, until it was done.

She looked down the corridor. Run to the corner, find the next corner, run to that, and keep running. Quicker than the eye, faster than time, get to each destination before she started. A cascade. Somewhere, she was out there, already running, already triggered, already dead.

It was only a matter of running until she reached that point.

She looked down the corridor, fixing on its end, trying to see herself there, looking back.

She felt the chill on her skin, the wind calling her on, somehow stronger than before. It was time to run, and she did.

But that sea of moments seemed different.

Her body was still there, frozen in mid-step, the Sweepers at her side. She was pushing her mind forward, through the moments, to where she needed to be, what she had to do. But there was something else too. Pulling at her, calling her name.

Voices.

Her mother. Holding her tight. The caress of her smile. You belong to me.

Silas. His fingertips on her face, his eyes meeting hers. I was never going to let you go. I never will. You belong to me, and we belong together.

Before they had been the anchor holding her in the here and now; this time, they were the currents in the sea, calling to her.

And Lucy gave herself to them.

x.

Grey city light is weeping through their thin curtains. The kind of light they can just doze in. Curled up, limbs entwined, wrapped in the closeness of a lazy day. Lucy can feel Silas in the bed behind her, his body is pressed up close to hers, skin brushing skin, his arm on her hip, his breath on her shoulder. He's there, so close

it's painful. The feel of their sheets and the taste of this air.

She knows where the currents have taken her straight away. This dream is no distant memory.

And she knows why she's here, in this place, in this moment.

Because this is goodbye.

Silas is gone. She's known that since he came to her in the cell. And yet, here she is, unable to give him up. Not yet. It's too soon.

She turns over and his face is right there in front of her. The long nose and the dark hair, a hint of stubble around his chin.

'We should have had a life together,' she whispers. 'We should have built a home and filled it with love and children and happiness.' She reaches out and touches his face. 'We should have had a future.'

There is movement behind his eyelids, a tightening at the corner of his mouth.

Lucy smiles and snuggles in closer, planting a soft kiss on his mouth.

His eyes blink open and find hers. He smiles and something inside of Lucy breaks. She grabs hold of his neck, pulling him towards her, slipping her other hand up under his T-shirt. There's a moment of surprise, then he kisses her back, and they roll together, laughing, playing.

A fist sounds on the door, but Lucy ignores it. It's Ais. She knows what she's come to tell them, knows it can wait.

That future will consume them regardless.

xi.

Silas may think he knows what's coming. And while in his head, he may realise the inevitability, may always have known that this was how they would end, his body may be a different matter. His body will want to live, and in that wanting it will remember only one response: to run.

In that circumstance, his feet will begin to move, stepping on the bread he has dropped. He won't know why the Sweepers have changed tactic. He won't care.

Silas may run deeper, back down the galleries, try to find a hiding place in some far corner of the Stockade. But he will have tasted the fresh air at that point, whispering down the tunnels towards him. And after all those weeks, that is the call it would be harder to ignore.

He may flee deeper or he may turn to the entrance, to the wind on his face.

As the gunfire runs out, the bodies he finds could be Stories, the Sweepers' patience finally run out. But as the breeze sweeps down the galleries, they could be the Sweepers themselves .

He may find a face he knows, hand in hand with another. Someone he feels he

should know but has never met.

The ground beneath his feet might start to shift, the world changing around him, insubstantial.

And he might look at that face he knows in wonder. ‘Lucy?’

‘This is a rewrite,’ she could say. There might be time enough another day to tell him what has happened, to talk of the past and the future. But for now, only one thing would matter. Her outstretched hand, reaching for him, and her eyes meeting his.

‘You and me. Our children. All of us.’ She might smile. ‘We belong together.’

Pre-narrative Briefing J
[Poem, 1820, pseudonymous]

La belle dame sans joie

Now what can irk, my Princess Fay with brows drawn tight as any bow?

The searing sun at high noon-day, it glimmers low

What frets and pines, my Princess Fay that is not soothed when Moons arise

And Stars in their flight pause and stay, to catch your eyes?

I see a handprint on your arm where mortal hand once dared to thrill,

And on thy lips a ghostly charm, it blushes still.

I met a Solder in the woods, a solid man, a weaver born,

And armed he was with the cold, cold iron, and pale horn.

He made a garland for my head, of meadow sweet and dandelion;

I looked at him, and in his eyes, I tasted time.

He set me on his saddle’s side, and gazed upon me as we rode,

I sang the brambles from our path, the earth un-hoe’d

I found him roots of relish sweet, guessing mayhap at mortal taste,

And woo'd him with a faltering word, and seemly haste.

I took him to one of my bowers, and there the time right glad we spent,

And if we speak of mortal towers, well towers were rent.

And afterwards the Soldier slept, and, from his moans, he dreamed of wars,

But neither war nor dreams have swept, our fairie shores.

I know not what pale death and lies, his wicked dreams cast at my feet,

I only know that when awoke, his eyes, mine, would not meet.

I saw his starved soul in his fears, that could not see freedom from woe,

So sorrowfully and with tears, I let him go.

And this is why I mourn the day, although at night the Moons arise,

And Stars in their flight turn and stay, to dry my eyes.

Poem, in imitation of Keats' La Belle Dame Sans Mercie

Author unknown, published 1820 under pseudonym

Alain Chartier[2], in *The Indicator.*

Eyes

The Institution of Mental Deviancy was the subject of some controversy among the citizens of the Eighth Homeworld. The name alone... the populace considered the name prejudicial, even cruel. The Great Houses issued only a communiqué concerning 'facts' scorning the truth-occulting emotions of the mob.

Accesser Induce's craft powered down from a leisurely Mach 10 as the institute came over the horizon. The rules required the place be approached in this way. No direct transduction. No timeships. The architecture of the block looked like an old man to her. All bony limbs, body mass unhealthy. Onboard intelligence narrowcast her business and authority, and the security released her from target lock. The institute has many patients, some of whom are dangerous. Even here. The grey seas roil under greyish orange skies. Rain starts.

‘Zauro? Captain Zauro?’

Induce looks through the invisible rho field that keeps the lavishly appointed cell from the world. A fine bed, books, flowers, a fine meal on a plate. At his name, Zauro looks up. He is unshaved and his hair a mess. She has never seen a Warcaptain in such deshabillé.

‘Captain Zauro, I’m Induce. I’m on the Exoteric Threats Committee. You were told of my arrival?’

He says nothing from his bed. Just stares at her with a hot, febrile eye. His right iris is green going to be yellow. His hair falls over his left.

‘You want to know where I went.’

‘We do. We’ve examined the chronometry of your timeship and suffice to say…’

‘You are baffled.’

‘We are.’

‘It was them. The Enemy.’

Induce grows cold inside. It feels as if she’s been injected with some dread.

‘My Lord, are you claiming -?’

‘It was seven years ago.’

I was examining black holes like rocks breaking gravity waves. It’s like the lower species watching tigers at the zoo, I suppose? You see. Foolish and beautiful. My timeship, what? A model 43. Mark 9. I was skipping one hundred thousand years, every twelve standard hours. The results were fascinating but I forgot their jagged beauty, when the ship came.

It was definitely travelling through non-regular spacetime. Not even one of the lettered or obverse variations, or my timeship would have recognised it. It was… beautiful. Aesthetically I mean. Hundreds of metres long and chased in gold and silver. Enough to pauper lesser species’ empires. Gems with the mass of men. Ramscoops of gossamer. It reminded of nothing so much as a swan, or perhaps a shark. It hailed me in a language so beautiful it stabbed tears into my eyes. My timeship shocked me. It hesitated to translate the words, afraid to defile them. It did so finally, reluctantly.

This was the Royal Corvette of the Tyleth Peoples. The Queen was asking me to accompany her to her home. Moved by beauty and strangeness and flattered to be chosen, I said yes.

The Corvette opened a portal into its universe. I followed.

I wish I had killed myself, destructed my own timeship, rather than enter that

coruscating gate of light.

I am a Warcaptain of House Arpexia. I am trained in metapsychic martial arts. But the queen transmitted along the carnalic-thanotic, aethetico-religious and infra-egoic bands. With force such as I have never felt. I immediately was sexually excited by her but also felt incredible bonding as well as what may be called... tremendum. *Timor Mortis Conturbat Me. Timor Amoris Conturbat Me.* She was taller than I, my head came to her clavicle and her face was a thing of sculptural beauty . On her brow, a tiara of painite and frozen time. Her gown, light itself, clinging to her. I had not had such a physiological reaction to another in three regenerations.

'Come,' she told me, in a voice like wind over ice. 'There are things to show you. I wish you to understand why what must be done is done.'

'Majesty, Majesty who are you? Why me? What must be done?'

'You, for you are alone and you are old as your kind understands age. So you shall be listened to. What comes? War.'

Her people are tall, almost as tall as her, and also broadcast alluring images. Inhuman, feline faces of entrancing beauty. Their gaze seemed to penetrate me. Bright as the attentions of hunting hawk, still as panthers. Their beauty thrills me carnally and aesthetically. More than once I saw a youth's handsomeness and was forced to lower my gaze before I betrayed some coarse and lascivious reaction. Their elders seemed austere and wise, looking over me with what seemed absolute comprehension.

They wore robes and chasubles and cuirasses made of crystals of ten thousand hues. Even my eyes did not know them all. After nine hundred years of life, the notion of learning new colours is a strange one, but I did.

I heard a Tyleth singing in the distance and had to bite my knuckle to avoid weeping.

To be in their presence, Doctor-Assessor Induce, is to feel. We have forgotten so much in the matter of the flesh, and they have weaponised our austerity against us.

The queen took my hand and her courtiers bowed.

'This is our prime planet. We wish to show you the Foundry.'

The planet had long been transformed. I hestitate to say Hausformed. Perhaps the

human word ‘terraformed’ would have been more accurate. It was already a version of that world that our prophesies say will be the birth foundry of the Enemy. Besides ‘Hausformed’ suggests the Great Houses industrial processes. Instead they sang their technology and their worlds to activation. Psychoactive gemstones that split like mitosis, drawing solar energy to fuel themselves. The planetary transformation was similarly elegant. Beneath a wild green sun that dominated half the sky, we walked vermillion and crimson fields. The Queen stopped and showed me a herd of their horses. Aquamarine and xanthic, forty heads high. They travelled through spacetime strangely. Solidity seemed nothing to them. I saw them dive into the meadow as if it were water.

‘Our cavalry.’

At last we came to a tower of glass. It was a twisted thing, like a spine. It revolved.

‘Here we train our finest soldiers. These are the Zhidee, our aristos.’

They moved at a speed to shame the fastest robot warrior. Their cloaks transforming colours to make them all but invisible. Indeed, they showed no radiation at all. Do you think I don’t know that’s impossible? It’s a facet of physical existence, woman, I know!

Yes, alright. Doctor-Assessor Induce, then. They hypertropised my sensorium with their thousand and one subtleties of gender. Here, I find it all now coarse and obvious. I mean no offense. The Zhidee?

Yes, we were speaking of them.

They wield weapons like bows. As long as themselves. I asked for a demonstration. A fool. They turned the weapons upon me. My body aged as I was struck. But aged at different rates. I cannot feel my left hand now, I tell you. Look at it. If I walk, my balance is poor and I’ve the heart of a man pushing at ten centuries in my left chest. Forty years older than the rest of me.

As I turned my wrath upon them they cloaked themselves and were gone. The Queen found this delightful.

‘I shall have to regenerate sooner now.’ I did not know how to express my anger to her Majesty. I felt petulant. She leaned forward and, Doctor, I tell you now, the kiss she placed upon my cheek will echo with me forever.

‘Yes, my dear. But it’s amusing this way.’

To my shame, I felt glad to have added to her delight.

The Foundry awaited us.

The warships of the Tyleth. Vast and cruel. Draconic in shape, the bridges formed

in a shape that may have been lupine, may have been reptilian. In jaws, underslung cannon.

‘There is a Secret Fire down the spiral of universes. Without it, nothing should want. We have tamed the Fire, learned its Truest Name. Should we turn it on your universe, the thingness of your reality will melt. Behold.’

We watched one, then. From her palace, a barque of the psychoactive crystal, lambent and cool. One of the vast dragon ships spread chiropteran wings and took to... it was not space in that universe. Space is not indigo and is not whirled with colours. The dragon opened jaws and the cannons fired and I felt time and space warp from it. A dreadful cynosure lanced from the ship and as the Secret Fire travelled, I felt the Laws of the universe vandalised.

We are the sons and daughters of the Great Houses. We anchored the web. Time and space are ours. We are not without our own armaments or technologies. But this was beyond the understanding of our people. They plumbed dimensional spaces none of us have even theorised.

They showed me other weapons. The Reckless Harp, dangling notes of ultramusic into my limbic system like whalers with harpoons. The Spear of Mortal Pain. Carved so beautifully from eleven kilograms of stasislocked-astatine. I felt its grim malevolence behind the seven hundred and seventy seven forcefields they kept it in. The artificial intelligence within it sadistic beyond the dreams of butchers.

The aelfshot, one touch of which can destroy the nervous and immune systems of a star whale. The Song of Love, hearing which will purge all violence from all who listen for years. The Songs of Snakes, that tempt Woman and Man to their fall. The Nuckalavee Protocol, surging from seas to send all who see it mad with horror and fear. The Red Javelin, that destroys time utterly.

‘We shall bring all of these and more against your universe, and your feeble chonarchy.’

The Queen lounged upon her throne, attended by flying creatures with the translucid wings of odonata.

‘But why, Majesty? We live in different universes but even did we not, there are no limits to the branes. Why conflict at all? We know nothing of your people and I see no need for daggers drawn, yours and mine.’

The Queen’s eyes grew black. The palace we were in floated through creamy space that matched them in its ebony night. I was cold in ways that were not physical. Through the translucent psychocrystal the Tyleth favour, I could see the

opening in the darkest night, the stars of their universe. Eyes, Doctor.

Eyes.

And they could see me. See me seeing them.

'Do you see them?' The Queen stood and touched me and my body thrilled to it.

'Yes,' she hissed. 'yes, Zauro, that is them. You see them. My only masters.'

'Wha-'

'They send their larvae to your universe, sometimes. Beasts. Daemons. They are... diminished by the laws of the clamorous, dull place you inhabit. We are... our universe is ensconced in theirs. They allow us to exist as a shark allows a remora. But we must pay a Tithe. Once a year. Seven hundred of ours go to those stars. They never return.'

She kissed me on the cheek, then.

'You'll see.'

She let me rest, then. My nerves were weak and I had seen too much. Even we weaken. In a bower of bliss I lay until I came awake, cold and stark with realisation.

'You'll see.'

The Queen loved me not. She simply wanted to see if I'd make a suitable replacement for the Tithe. She was tasting me, for her Masters.

I ran.

The details are not important. I am not without resources. I am not without technology and tools. I called my timeship to my side and I ran. I ran from their universe, from their reality and I almost wept to return to our own. I felt so leaden. Time seemed so heavy, then. It still does. As if I was weighed down with it.

I had been in their universe for seventeen thousand years.

And then I was found. By the Great House's Interior Guard. My timeship... I never heard it but it was screaming and screaming and screaming. And I was brought here.

Doctor Induce stands.

'This is a fanciful tale.'

'It's not over. Listen. They are trying to escape their world. Their Tithe. They view billions of us as worth less than their own lives, less than one of their lives.

They will offer us up to the monstrous eyes and be free of the terrible deals they have made. Tyleth.'

The Warcaptain spits hot flecks of spittle against the glass of his prision. Doctor-Assessor Induce cannot help but be disgusted at his lack of dignity.

'The Queen of the Tyleth is going to come and feed us all to Hel-'

She stands, suddenly. This is irrationality, it stinks of it.

She stands and leaves the madman Zauro to his ravings. This is fabrication. Sick hallucination. The Enemy is a known threat yes, and the masters of the Houses have declared that its name and nature is not for general discussion: but even so, there must be limits. This is, perhaps black propaganda, this is perhaps paranoia.

His timeship will be restructured and its memories revoked. He will never spend a day free of this place.

As she leaves and takes her berth in her vessel, she looks out at the stars. She is sure they do not stare back.

Pre-narrative Briefing K

[A heady mixture to distill this. The Briefing savants consult on the long chains of the molecules – the artificial proteins coded to spike and reshape the receptors that receive them. These memories, these reworked memories, will serve their function.]

What we can imagine we can fight. What we can envisage we can overcome. Never the Great Unknowable. Never the Mask over the Eyeless. Never the Language below Space. The Perversion Imps.

We innoculate ourselves with Maybes and Mighthavebeens. For fear of what lies beyond the Curtain of Crimson Time – beyond the capabilities of sensoriums such as ours.

Recording of the Debrief of Xenaria Who Survived.

We Are the Enemy

I need to cut the fallen tree in half. Much like Samuel L. Jackson, it has broken

my concentration. I was thinking about the Faction but now it's gone - whatever it was.

I cycle twenty miles of the trail every day, or at least every week day, Monday to Friday. I'm trying to keep from getting fat. The trail follows Salado Creek up to McAllister Park - the place where Todd encounters tiny frogs in *Against Nature*. At least, I think that scene was in *Against Nature*. It could have been from one of the fifty-million earlier drafts proposed in pornographic detail before regime change allowed me to actually *write* the fucking thing. The trail follows Salado Creek up to McAllister Park except for whenever the water company closes off a section in order to work on the sewers.

That was one of the strangest sights I've seen - the first time I saw the sewer system burst a gasket. I'd just passed Los Patios and there was this massive fountain at the center of the waters, those semi-permanent pools where the creek opens out. It was like what happens before Godzilla emerges from Lake Ashinoko, or Stingray or Skydiver in those Gerry Anderson shows when I was a kid. I guess the pipe must run beneath the bed of the creek and had cracked with the pressure, and now there was a fountain. Devo's cheerily appalling *Fountain of Filth* played in my mind's ear each time I rode past.

Velvet hours of darkness came to an abrupt end as a halogen glare burst virgin optic nerves. An effort to shut out the light was made without hope. No eyelids.

Staring from the mirror, some deep sea creature trapped under glass.

Initial modifications had been no more than an accepted cruelty, but now it seemed that the Interrogator was saving himself the trouble of preliminary mutilation.

They needn't have bothered. The atrocities were reduced to the same wash of background noise as his capacity for despair. Without hope, his misery had lost its meaning. Nothing the enemy could do to him would make a difference. Figures moved beyond the glare, footfalls softly hinting at boredom.

*'**Name**.'*

THE MAN WITH WHEELS [House military: Technology]

The Man with Wheels, an affectionate term for the Kuwittering Machine, is laid to rest within the first alcove on the left as one enters the Hall of Autophagic Weaponry. The Hall remains in darkness, but there is enough light by which to distinguish the forms generally taken by the wheeled man, at least within the limits of whichever cultural framework you happen to have about your person – that which may lie beyond those limits appearing as undifferentiated information static, obviously. The original purpose of the Kuwittering machine is presumed to

be held somewhere within its indeterminate cortex of torn wood-effect wallpaper, found objects, and old newspaper headlines, but has thus far eluded detection, presumably through being a function of the detritus materials from which it is composed. Strategist Enhoenta proposes that the Man with Wheels may not even belong in the Hall, possibly having been derived from lesser species' or even enemy technology left in the care of the Great Houses principally as a means of using up deductive resources which might be more profitably expended elsewhere.

There it was, just like Old Faithful - the eternal Fountain of Filth...

Strangely, it didn't smell of anything in particular - unlike the crap which always floods the trail back by the horse stables on Ira Lee. It didn't smell and there wasn't really even any sound, leaving me with just a vaguely Biblical allusion to something on the surface of the waters. Perhaps it didn't happen. Perhaps it was a metaphor. Perhaps the fallen tree is likewise a metaphor.

They've closed off the trail between Los Patios and Ladybird Johnson in order to work on the sewers. That section will be impassable and full of trucks and drilling and cranes, which is a massive pain in the arse for me; but I'm not going to be beaten this time. I've worked out that if I ride up past the Baptist hospital and along to Village Drive, I should be able to find a way through the subdivision onto the land at the other side of the creek, what I suppose must be the eastern bank. There's a footpath through the woodland beneath the cliff that comes out at Ladybird Johnson, so maybe I can get past - I tell myself. I've looked at Google Earth and it seems like it might be possible.

I was thinking about the Faction, about *We Are the Enemy* and what I'll write once I get in, but it's gone because there's a fallen tree blocking the sodding path.

It was all going so well.

I guess I could bring a saw tomorrow, but it looks like mesquite so it would be like trying to cut granite. On the other hand, I'll bet Byron has a chainsaw I could borrow, and he might even be glad of the wood for the barbecue pit. I'm sure he told me the wood was sought after.

He bustled his mouth at the words but its musculature was unfamiliar, besides which they already knew his name. They knew his rank and the directive of the original mission. They knew everything there was to know.

His own biodata had been pinned out in underspace and dissected over and over until they understood more of him than even he could have known in a thousand generations. They repeated the process with the other previously overwritten variants,

peeling back each one, all possible histories filleted for the last scrap of information, useless or otherwise.

The voice rose again. 'Name.'

Barely even a question, it was another empty gesture in a cycle, something to distinguish Interrogator from prisoner, self from non-self.

The second response died in whichever orifice was presently wired to his speech centres, assuming this latest victim-form had been engineered with a mouth. The memories of each enforced regen were merging into one. He could no longer recall which organs had been edited from the ongoing biological narrative.

'I'm not anticipating speech.' There might almost be a trace of pity in the voice.

Glancing down, he realised that he could move his head. This victim-form hadn't been cell-bonded to the frame. He raised a paddle-like limb for inspection, same basic design as the previous body, but with a miniature frill of flexible digits running along the edge of the pink sail of flesh.

'Name.'

He crashed to the floor as the frame was jerked away. Epidermal nerve endings howled upon dirty concrete. Sacks of bruises came to immediate bloom across his unfamiliar extremities.

'Name.'

Dark, painful spots swam before him, unfocused scraps of grit gummed to damp, lidless eyes. Something wet and acidic sluiced onto his back, burning and stinging. It smelt like hydrochloric.

'That's better, isn't it?' Heels snapped on concrete. 'Now we're getting somewhere.'

Boots and knees hunkered down at the edge of the light. This was about as much as he'd seen of his Interrogator since captured. It was about as much as he'd seen of the enemy since the start of the War for that matter. All they had done to him, to all the versions of him they had induced, and he still had no idea as to who or what they were.

THE DRY VINEYARD [House military: Technology]

This machine is to be found at three locations within the Hall of Autophagic Weaponry, these being the points at which it intersects with the ongoing development of theory regarding its operation and function - intersection here being where an idea matches that which it attempts to describe to a degree of accuracy beyond the possibility of coincidence. Given the tenuous relationship of the Dry Vineyard to noumenal space, in addition to whatever else it may or may not do, it represents something of a security risk where manifest in idea spaces

beyond the confines of the Hall, and even the Homeworld in two recorded instances. These security requirements are met by the Regen-Inf honour guard stationed at the Hall and the fact of no-one having quite discerned what the Dry Vineyard is supposed to do. The Dry Vineyard yields on average between thirty and forty bottles per season, of which the quality is reported to be adequate.

I came up by the hospital, and it turned out that you *can* get through. There's a wall built right across Village Drive with a little iron gate at the side like in *Tom's Secret Garden*. You go through and there's the subdivision. The track leading down to the creek seemed dubious, and a lot like it had been trodden through someone's front yard, although I suppose there would have been signs were that the case. The path is rockier than I remember it being from whenever the last time was – which I guess would have been at least a year ago – but it isn't too bad on my crappy Walmart mountain bike. Even walking, it's just ten minutes from the subdivision to Ladybird Johnson, so that's good.

Except there's a tree fallen across the path about halfway along. The incline of the ground beneath the cliff is such that the tree trunk is elevated at a little below chest height. The upper end is at rest upon the remains of another dead tree. I can duck under, but it's annoying and inconvenient. I suppose the path is outside the jurisdiction of the city, so the guys who clear stuff from the trail wouldn't bother with this. Maybe – as I believe I already said – it's a metaphor. Maybe the enemy put it there, felled the tree right across the path, right across the track of my train of thought before I could work out just who the enemy might be, making them real by my act of visualisation.

Let's think about this.

The dribbling of acid ceased as a fresh wave of pain ran across the top of his head - back and forth, back and forth, back and forth over nerves and sores. He was being stroked like a pet.

There was a sound, a silent subordinate nearby.

'Cell Five needs his beauty sleep. You may forego the customary violations, but don't let him know that. Let's at least try to keep up appearances.'

Booted feet obediently walked away.

A puddle of light blossomed in the centre of the chamber with a giant three-dimensional head hung motionless and opaque in the air. The smooth forehead swept down towards thin, pale eyebrows, a lumpy nose and a stubble ravaged jaw line. The face conformed to basic humanoid type, although caught in the frozen frame, one or two subtle differences were apparent. A thin film of skin covering the nostrils and flat

letterbox pupils were typical early regen-inf adaptations for service in a carbon-heavy environment; unremarkable considering the biological extremes to which the Great Houses had driven their more recent foot soldiers.

That had been him, but it was a long time ago.

'Play.'

His former self shuddered towards speech, a fragile state of mind revealed in involuntary ticks around the redrimmed eyes.

'We didn't know who or what could be writing us, but we threw everything we had into the retaliation. We fought back as hard as we could. I already told you about the tree. I realise it doesn't sound like much, but just the sheer reach of cause and effect, or what looks like cause and effect from a certain angle – just the ability to extend ourselves that far was a major breakthrough. You should be—'

*'**We didn't know who or what could be writing us**,' – the Interrogator on the recording seemed to be mocking him with his own words. 'I would say that you still don't really know, do you? You cannot be sure.'*

The voice behind him chipped in, the same voice expanding upon what it had said years or perhaps centuries before. 'Perhaps your knowledge never really mattered.'

I TOLD MYSELF IT WOULD BE OKAY [House Military: Technology]

This machine told itself it would be okay. It didn't seem like it was going to be a problem – I mean, who could possibly have predicted such an outcome? It made no sense, not when you thought about it. It's okay. It would be all right in the end, except it somehow wasn't. No-one's going to blame you. You couldn't have known. There was simply no way of telling. It's okay. It made no sense, not when you thought about it. I mean, who could possibly have predicted such an outcome? No-one's going to blame you. It made no sense, not when you thought about it. No-one's going to blame you.

No-one's going to blame you. It's okay. Everything is fine. It's okay. Everything is fine.

The Great Houses are at war with the enemy, or have *always* been at war with the enemy, which is possibly the same thing. The enemy is not so much an enemy in the sense of Germany being the enemy of England from 1939 to 1945. It isn't anything quite that coherent, and I'm wondering if it's even something which can sit upon any relativist scale. It isn't *just the same thing* seen from the opposite angle. It is the opposition itself. It is that which defines the Great Houses, by which their existence is given meaning.

Meanwhile I have a war to fight, the war against my own blubber. I'll do the

twenty miles even if it kills me, and will do it each day so that it becomes such a ritual as to preclude the need for my even thinking about it. The enemy have struck down the tree in such a way as to oblige me to dismount, then to sort of limbo dance under the trunk whilst holding my bike at an angle of around thirty degrees. It's all over in a minute, allowing for swearing and adjustments made during the resumption of verticality. Nevertheless, the operation casts a shadow much greater than a minute, and even as I left this morning I was already annoyed by the impending and inevitable punctuation of my journey.

We've always been told that the enemy are a different kind of history, which I never saw as being that difficult to understand.

Maybe the enemy are those outer space robot people we're not allowed to mention – as seen in at least two films with Peter Cushing – maybe that's who the enemy really are!

The Interrogator spoke over the recording of himself, truncating the observation which had followed to just, 'likewise a metaphor.' The soundtrack clipped as a sharp electronic crackle overloaded the microphone. The prisoner's head spasmed from view leaving an empty locus of blue light hanging limp at the chamber's heart.

'Get up.'

Shuffling noises, muted sobbing. 'Get up!'

The face loomed back into view, eyes more red, grimy beads of sweat dotting the forehead. It turned to one side, facing someone off camera. 'I've already explained all of this.'

'Not at me – the recorder!'

'I've already explained all of this to your predecessor.'

They had brought an older technique back into service, the blinding light at the end of the tunnel. Enemy forces had fallen. The Great Houses had swarmed in to break open the experiment, a whiff of hope throwing the atrocities which would follow into sharp relief. It really made no difference.

The projection was switched off and the room fell briefly silent.

'What's his name?'

'This is Ordnance-Decurion Goralschaixianthellipse.'

'Your techniques leave much to be desired, I would say.' The words were made of some hard, unfamiliar metal. It took him a moment to decipher the long forgotten cadence of what this new person had said. All he had known were the questions. Someone was in trouble.

The Interrogator was in trouble.

*'You're worse than **they** are.'*

'We had a job. We did it.'

He remembered the false ending, deliverance from the forces of...

'You are mistaken.' The new person addressed him directly, almost kindly. 'Your host, I would say, has exceeded his commission. We are here to convey you to a place of safety, as is your due.'

He framed a question, made sounds with some orifice or other, and somehow the noise was understood. 'This ***is*** *the Homeworld,' he replied. 'You never left.'*

THE NECTAR CELLOS [House military: Technology]

These machines are to be encountered as one approaches the end of one's itinerary around the Hall of Autophagic Weaponry. They represent a commodification so extreme as to have shifted the initial identity and composition of that which has been commodified beyond quantification by ordinary means, and so it could be argued that the constructions here are the result of a process rather than its mechanism. The process itself has been likened to the effect of the Jallama Reed Transmissions on the Broken Remote colony of Fallahal, except the subject appears to have been originated on Earth. All we can say with any degree of certainty is that in this instance the process has resulted in breaking certain complex cultural models down into a series of atavistic bleatings of childlike composition, which seems significantly similar to how the enemy has been seen to operate during most major engagements thus far. It seems such a pity that the technology had been proven so catastrophically unstable.

I am bewildered that I've even seen this as a proposal, but I guess not everyone liked the first, arguably more definitive answer. It reminds me of conversations with Harley on the subject of climate change. *What a needlessly hysterical headline*, he observes before gazing off into the middle distance like Arthur C. Clarke. *What is the mystery of climate change? Where is the evidence? Perhaps we shall never be able to say for sure. Perhaps we shall never know.*

The different kind of history we're talking about would presumably simply be the kind of history which doesn't have *you* in it, the kind of history which features no Great Houses anchoring the thread all those years ago, nor anything born of the Great Houses, nor even anything which ever interacted with those Great Houses on any level. I'm sorry that it's not as exciting as Outer Space Robot People, but wouldn't it make more sense? This different kind of history might just as well be one in which your empire has been reduced to a background detail – not even one born from much detailed thought – in your favourite Saturday afternoon television show, the children's own programme which adults other than

myself adore. Can you imagine what that kind of history would look like? Wouldn't you be resentful if you found out that your entire existence had been written by someone more real than yourself? Wouldn't you regard that individual as your enemy, I mean at least potentially. I know they might write you as a millionaire lounging around a pool guzzling Martinis, but yet again they might not because, let's be honest, why would anyone want to read that?

On the other hand, I suppose there was J.G. Ballard.

Never mind.

It was just a thought.

Pre-narrative Briefing L

Just as there can be collateral damage, so there can be – for certain sorts of minds – collateral opportunities. Some such enterprises the so-called Old Higher Powers once graciously permitted; there were even periods before the Present Conflict when certain third parties, and trustworthy, harmless, non-aggressive species were permitted limited license to relocate themselves in space-time. In recent years, in non-active War Fronts, reps of the New Spiral Order have begun to investigate the provision of similar modes of operation. It is hard to see what *long term* gain they envisage, although it may be connected to their fatuous slogan ALL OR NONE. This has been interpreted as meaning that the capacity to travel in time should be available either to every sapient (which is self-evidently a recipe for colossal disaster, with the potential to disrupt all established components of the Whorl, including natural economic opportunities) or none (which would be to reduce all species to time-bound automata without the free trader capacities we have now been able to purchase from the Dealers In Yellow).

Marko Marz: *Retroeconomics and Timeschism for Dummies (4973).*

Timeshare

Ok, so, not gonna lie, ‘m just a l’il bit drunk. Just two marg’ritas though. Or maybe three? Like, three max? Hot sun, that’s it. Too much sun. I gotta go lie down. Just gotta remember room number – thirty-four something. Thirty-four oh eight? Forty-three oh eight? Ooh. Sign saying free drinks. I’m on vacation, yes?

Like, what's the point if I can't have a couple of drinks?

Ooh. Jewellery stall in hotel lobby. Shiny! All silver and turquoise.

Like, *how* much? Aren't Indians – oops, sorry, 'Native Americans,' yeah, yeah, my bad – all making a freaking fortune from casinos these days? And now they're all *artists* too? Rip-off, much? Anyway, where'd the free drinks go? Ah, that way.

The woman at the door is all 'Ma'am? Ma'am?'

'Huh?'

'This presentation probably won't interest you.'

'Presentation?'

'It's for the people at the convention. Ninety minute presentation. *Before* they serve the drinks,' she replies, like she thinks I am some dumb blonde only interested in cocktails. But, like, ninety *minute* presentation? Seriously?

'What d'ya mean, not gonna interest me? Uh. Jus' goin' sit down here a minute.'

'Maybe you should go lie down for a while?'

'Lie down? 'M not *that* drunk. And at least *I* got dress sense.' I mean, she's wearing a canary yellow polo shirt. What is *with* that?

'It's a uniform,' says the woman, all kind of huffy.

'Uniform shuniform. *This*,' I'm pointing at my beach cover-up, 'this is a Betsey Johnson.'

'I'm sure it is, ma'am.'

'I got as much right to be here as – as anybody else. You want me to speak to the hotel manager?'

'I *really* don't think this is going to interest you.'

'I have a college degree you know. Business Administration major? UCLA? I'm not like, some *airhead*.'

'I didn't say you were, ma'am. I just don't think you're our target demographic.'

'How 'bout you let *me* decide?'

The woman sighs. 'Ok, look, your call. Just try not to throw up on the carpet.'

Ooh. It's a PowerPoint doodad, only, you know, virtual. Like, it's inside my head? How'd they even *do* that? Nice pictures. Beaches and mountains and shit. Oh, *I* know what this is! It's a timeshare presentation. Like Shannon went to. She got an *awesome* timeshare in Florida. Beautiful apartment complex. It's got those pretty coloured lights in the swimming pool and one of those bars you have to swim to. Why does it always happen to other people and not me?

More pictures. That one's a bit weird though. Like, octopuses? Pushing stones around? Maybe it's snorkelling. Coral reefs. Ok, that one's better. Native village or

something? Must be really, like, primitive. Maybe Africa? Someone should develop the heck outa that shit. Anyway, don't want a timeshare in Africa. All those snakes and **[terminology deleted during war-therapy for your safety and convenience.]**

Huh? Good investment? Double my money in ten years? Cool.

Weird. Little circle of mushrooms in that slide. A bit, you know, hipster. No, not hipster, *hippy*, that's right, hippy. Before hipster. Flower power. And this one the sky's a funny colour. Maybe a filter. Like, arty shit? Maybe?

This one's better. Mountains and lakes. Peaceful. Prefer beaches though. And beach bars. Where's that drink? How long's it been? Longest ninety minutes ev-*er*! Might as well stick it out, now.

OMG! *Freaky* guy sitting over there – I can't see properly in this light. What's the deal with the eyes, dude? And is that hair or, like, feathers in a wig?

You know, this timeshare thing might not be such a crapshoot. Some of these photographs are just *amazing*. Never seen scenery like it, like, no buildings at all. Not so sure about the one with the moss, though. Or this one. Looks like the moon. You know, if the moon had, like, three suns. Graphic designer must have been on something.

'All yours for whatever time you pick,' the guy at the front is saying. He's wearing a yellow polo shirt too. But his sales pitch is pretty cool.

Ugh, I could still use a drink. But, you know, it'd be awesome to like, be able to go on vacation whenever. All that money on hotels – I wouldn't have to worry about that. Just pay the maintenance every year. Hell, yeah, if I cut down on the shopping and the nightlife I could even do it on *my* crappy salary. God, how did I end up with such an awful job? I deserve better than that. I *am* better than that. Freaking economy.

There's some weird-ass people in here, though. That guy looks like he's got snakes growing out of his face. Maybe I'm drunker than I thought? Crazy; I thought I was sobering up.

I wish I didn't have to go back to LA – crappy apartment, crappy job. Why can't I catch a break? Honours degree from a good school and now I'm a grunt in HR. My life sucks.

Oh, here come the drinks. *Finally*. Yay, little umbrella!

Mm, vacation.

Oh-*kay* then! Where do I sign?

(Two weeks later)

So my credit card bill has arrived? And it's, like, an insane amount of money? I

couldn't possibly have spent that much. It's got to be a mistake. I've never even heard of Historic Opportunities Inc. I'm going to get on the phone and sort it out.

According to the Web, Historic Opportunities Inc. sells timeshares. I bought a freaking timeshare? Anyway, I can't find a phone number for them on the website. I'll email them.

I can't find an email address for them. There are no contact details anywhere on the whole damn website. How can this have happened? Seriously, wouldn't I *remember* if I'd bought a timeshare? I didn't get *that* drunk.

Well, yeah, okay, there was that one night–

—oh shit.

Wasn't there a contract? I'm sure I remember something about a contract.

So I find the contract folded up and wedged inside some espadrilles that I bought from the hotel gift shop and wore once before the sole came off. Label said Vera Wang, but seriously? *I* say knockoff. Who wears espadrilles now anyway? I frantically skim through the contract. Apparently I have, like, actually bought a timeshare at 1300-1350 Playa Tenochtitlan, Mexico.

This is the weirdest contract ever. *'The purchaser of the timeshare property [the owner] shall be at liberty to undertake any and all commercial development of the timeshare [the property], without let or hindrance save that which may transpire by virtue of the nature of the property itself.'* Like, why would I want to commercially develop a timeshare apartment?

And then: '*Historic Opportunities Inc. [the vendor] is not liable for any or all consequences of said development, including, but not limited to, industrial action, tribal unrest, environmental disaster, war, famine, or historical anomaly*'.

There's nothing that looks like get-out clause anywhere in whole contract. Shit. No contact telephone number or email address either.

Eventually I find a street address in the contract, in Irwindale, just up the freeway. I'll go there tomorrow to sort this out. I mean, they can't actually expect to get away with this kind of thing? Like, I was *clearly* taken advantage of.

Historic Opportunities Inc. is in a little industrial park just off the 210. At least there's parking, I guess? I wave the contract at the sales rep guy at the reception desk. 'I want to make a complaint.'

The dude takes the contract and looks at it. '1300-1350 Playa Tenochtitlan?' he asks. I just nod because I kind of spaced out there for a moment. I've a bit of déjà vu going on – like, he's dressed *exactly* like the guy who gave the presentation at the hotel. Seeing him brings it all back. Well, I say it brings it *all* back, but some

of it is still kind of hazy? But I remember the dress code – who's going to forget bright yellow polo shirts? They all have identical tans, too. Creepy.

'What seems to be the problem?' asks the sales rep.

I pull myself together and do my best customer-from-hell glare. 'Your company took advantage of me. Like, when my judgement was impaired?'

The guy looks concerned. 'I'm sorry you feel that way,' he says.

I wave the contract under his nose again, and have satisfaction of seeing his head jerk back. 'The only decision I should have been making when I signed this was whether to have my coffee black or white.'

'So how can I help?'

'Excuse me? Uh, cancel the contract maybe?'

The sales rep smiles a winning smile. I bet that orthodontic work cost a fortune. 'I'm sure we can come to an agreement. But would you like to take another look at your property first?

'Are you trying to mess with me?'

'Not at all. I wouldn't want you to make any hasty decisions you might regret later. It really is one of our very best properties, you know.'

I'm about to point out the irony to this sleazeball, given that hasty decisions got me into this mess, but, you know, maybe this will be last opportunity to see pictures of my timeshare and dream of what might have been. 'Oh, ok then.'

The sales rep stands up and gestures me to follow him. With a flourish he opens a door that I guess leads to the back part of the industrial unit. 'After you.'

So I go through. For a moment, feels like I'm about to sneeze or something – like, that moment when you close your eyes and everything stops? And you can't do anything until the sneeze has come? And then the feeling passes and I open my eyes and – everything's changed.

I mean *everything*. Even before I opened my eyes the temperature changed, like the room I was walking into was a giant greenhouse. The air itself felt hotter and more humid, and there was a strong smell of damp earth and vegetation that's starting to rot. And then I did open my eyes, and I'm on a freaking beach. Not like an ocean beach though – it's more pebbly than sandy and there's no salt smell in the air. Maybe a big lake?

And I remember that VR deal at the presentation? When I couldn't work out how they did it? And I wonder if this is something like the same kind of thing and I turn around to ask the receptionist but he's not there and neither is the door.

So I start walking along the lakeshore because what else can I do? I guess I'd think it was really pretty if I wasn't freaking out. The lake stretches off into the distance and there's mountains beyond that, all sort of green and lush-looking and

it's just, like, *so* different to LA you can't even imagine. The vegetation where I'm walking comes almost all the way down to the shoreline – even where the ground turns into beach and there's no soil for roots, there's tendrils of creepers reaching down toward the water. Sometimes I have to step over shit or bend down out of the way of an overhanging tree in order to keep walking.

But then I walk around a small headland and the view in front of me is quite different – much more open, like the forest's been cleared and planted with corn plants, only whatever these plants are they're pretty short for corn. And whoever's growing them isn't too good at weeding because there's some other kind of plant in there too – some kind of vine, twisting up around the corn plants. And there's *another* weed with big leaves growing around the bottoms of the stalks. I can see a kind of pumpkin-like thing – only green, not orange – on the ground in among the leaves. I don't know where I am, but these guys sure as hell don't know how to farm.

But that's not really what grabs my attention. Because about half a mile away I can see some thatched huts, and where there's huts there's people, and maybe where there's people I might get some answers, you know? So I keep walking.

It's lucky I'm not moving fast because I'm just rounding the side of a stand of trees when I stop short and then backtrack pretty fast. I don't take in much that first glance, just enough to tell me that there's quite a lot of people here, and they're like, natives or something? Like, wearing animal skins around their waists and not much else? But it's not the clothes but the blood that catches my attention and this is all far too real to be any kind of virtual reality deal.

More cautiously, I peer again. I wasn't wrong about the blood. There's one guy on the ground, legs and arms outstretched and a great wound in his chest – and another, being bent backwards over some kind of stone pedestal, and this dude with a shiny black knife, and even as I'm watching he plunges the knife into the chest of the guy on the stone block and rips it downwards. And then he's got both hands in there and he's doing something, and the guy on the stone – guess I'll call it an altar – is screaming and then he stops and the guy with the knife is holding up something that's red and dripping and – OMG – it's still beating and I'm losing my breakfast.

And that's a problem because then someone hears me retching, and shouts. And the guy who shouted pulls out what looks like a piece of rope that's tucked into the skin around his waist, and he stoops down and picks up something from the ground, and then he whirls the rope around his head and kind of *flicks* and this freaking great big *rock* whistles past my head missing it by no more than an inch. And I think *fuck this shit* and I turn and I run for my life.

And then I hear shouts and barking and I look over my shoulder and there's this pack of dogs racing after me. They're only little dogs, with pointy ears that are so big they're almost funny, but there's enough of them and they're barking so fiercely that it's not really funny at all. And I'm wearing my Jessica Simpson ballet flats, which are like my favourite shoes in the whole world? But it turns out they're shit when you're running for your life. And the dogs are right behind me now and I'm literally expecting to feel teeth sinking into my heels when suddenly this arm darts out from behind a stand of corn and pulls me behind it and abruptly everything goes suddenly quiet, like I can still hear the dogs but it's like they're on the TV, you know? They no longer sound close to me is what I'm getting at.

So I swing around to look at the dude who pulled me to the side, and I wonder if I've found like the freaking tribe witch doctor or something, because he's all dressed up in these long dark red robes and he's got these curvy metal shoulder plates that kind of curve up behind his head as well, like some kind of weirdly-shaped halo.

'What did you *do*?' I ask, once I've managed to stop panting and retching and shivering long enough to get the words out.

'A simple force field, nothing more,' he says. 'Come, human woman, this is not the place for you. It is time for you to return.'

I look around frantically, but I can't see anything that looks like a force field. What would a force field look like anyway? But the dogs have stopped barking and are kind of sniffing around the ground about two feet away from me, and I can see them, but I can barely hear them anymore, so, I guess?

'Just get me out of here!' I say, almost sobbing. I've gotten my breath back, but I'm still pretty shaky.

He pulls out some kind of, I don't know, little device from his robes and he twists something and he points it at me, and nothing happens. So he frowns, and he looks at the device, and then he shakes it, which in other circumstances would be kind of hilarious, because he was all dignified and regal a moment ago, and now he looks like my mom when she can't get a phone signal.

A voice comes from behind me. 'No point,' it says. 'I've blocked it.' I swing around in a panic because, hello? New threat? But it's just the sales rep from the reception desk in Irwindale, bright yellow polo shirt and everything. He's smiling and he looks totally relaxed. In the bright sunlight his tan looks kind of orange and fake.

'You dare!' says the dude in the robes. He sounds so grand and pompous as he says it that my heart nearly stops all over again. But the guy in the yellow shirt

just keeps on smiling, and *that's* when I stop being scared and get hopping mad.

'Yeah!' I yell. 'You dare? You, like, *dumped* me here! Alone! I'd have gotten killed if it hadn't been for this dude.'

The sales rep shrugs. 'You don't want the property, there are plenty of others who do. This way we didn't have to give you a refund.'

'The frick is this property deal anyway?' I'm *really* not doing well here.

The sales rep rolls his eyes. 'Just how did you get into this? Never mind. You got exactly what your contract said. Playa Tenochtitlan, Mexico, AD 1300 to 1350. Prime real estate. Right in the middle of a power vacuum, just before the Aztecs get themselves properly established. Ripe for development.' He jerks his head toward the heart-pulling-out guys, who I can just sort of hear shouting in the background. 'Wouldn't need more than a couple of twenty-first-century handguns to subdue that lot. Then the whole shebang's yours. Labour, natural resources – the lot.'

'*AD* 1300 – 1350? You mean, like, *years*?'

'Oh, for the love of Pete. You bought a timeshare. A *share* of *time*.' The sales rep makes a fist and raps his knuckles against his head. 'Got it?'

'And now she must return to her own time,' says the dude in the robes. 'This is no place for her.'

'Like you care,' says the sales rep.

'The Great Houses have an ancient duty to maintain the integrity of the timeline.'

'Yeah, so long as you don't have to put any *effort* into it. I'm amazed you ever managed to get of your butts long enough to notice we were operating, let alone start a war.'

'War?' I squeal. Like, nobody said anything about a freaking *war*!

The sales rep rolls his eyes at me again. 'You can stop panicking. This era is protected by the Accord. No fighting near here. In fact,' he nods significantly in the direction of fancy-headdress dude, 'this representative of the Great Houses could be argued to be in breach of the agreement simply by being here.'

'Some might claim that your operations here are a breach of that same accord,' replies the guy in the headdress.

The sales rep smiles and spreads out his hands. 'Just a little business venture.'

'It is the right and the privilege of the Great Houses to guard the timelines against interference and incoherence.'

'And look at the lost opportunities and suffering that result! In twenty-five years the Aztecs will have a stranglehold on this region which will allow them to build one of the cruellest and most bloodthirsty empires this planet has ever seen! Not

to mention the waste of manpower and resources. This place could be put to work. It could be *used* – just think what a little commercial development could do. There could be schools, health care, industry! And healthy profit margins, too. *Your* trouble,' the sales rep points at the other guy, 'is that you can't see the possibilities. You can't look toward the future, which is damn ironic if you ask me.'

Fancy-robes dude doesn't look in the least bit bothered. 'No doubt you can foresee the effects of your interventions as they unfold through history. No doubt you have proof that that the changes you bring into being will do less harm than good. No doubt, with every sale of every time and place, you establish inviolable safeguards that ensure justice and peace for all.'

Again, the sales rep spreads out his hands. 'Gotta be better than sitting on our asses doing jack shit.'

'Your ideology is degenerate and puerile. There was no choice but to resist.'

'Yeah, well, we'll leave all that to be decided by the war. In the meantime, how about you get off my land?'

'I think we have established that this land belongs to the human female. Unless you intend to renege on the contract?'

'Hey!' I'm *so* mad. 'What am I, like cattle or something?' I'm so pissed at these two guys, just standing here shooting the breeze, while I'm majorly freaking out.

It's the sales rep who replies. 'I thought you just wanted to go home?'

I laugh hysterically. 'Ya think?'

'Fine. I'm sure my, uh, colleague here from the Great Houses will oblige. Now, if I could just have your signature…'

I take the pen and I'm in such a state that I'm, like, *this* close to signing. The pen's actually on the paper before it occurs to me to ask, 'yeah, ok, so what am I actually signing here?'

'Just a reversion of the rights of the property to us. You get to go home, forget this ever happened, we take it from here. Everybody wins.'

Once again, my pen's actually on the paper – and then I remember my credit card bill. 'And I get a refund?'

'Ah. I'm afraid, if you look closely at the terms and conditions, by voluntarily leaving the property by means other than those provided by Historic Opportunities Inc., you forfeit –'

'— *What*? Fuck that.'

(Two years later)

So I've settled in *quite* well, thank you. I got the house built to my own design,

right here on the lakefront – the view is *awesome*. Mosquitos were an issue at first, but some DDT took care of that. Didn't think I'd be able to get it, but it turns out those Sales Rep guys have a lot of contacts.

Those Sales Reps – I guess they're kind of like the Masons? But bigger? All into time travel and progress and shit. Don't really understand it if I'm honest, and I'm *never* going to understand those yellow polo shirts. But I will say this for them, if it's in the contract, they deliver. *I've* never had any problems with them at all. They even fixed up an Internet connection for me! Yeah, here!

As for the Great Houses, yeah, not heard a thing. Can't say I miss them. Arrogant much? And the war hasn't been a problem, either. Although I have wondered about a sideline into weapons production? Just in case? We've not moved into heavy manufacturing yet, but never say never.

We've been diversifying quite a bit, actually. Who'd have thought that that Business Administration degree would be so useful? Furniture's been a very big seller – virgin forests for hardwood, and all those artisanal craftsmen. Pottery Barn can't get enough of us. And our clothing line is going pretty well. The women here will do *anything* to get away from spending all their days grinding corn with a quern and handstone, and who can blame them? They're naturals with a sewing machine and *very* hard workers. And the labour costs are *very* competitive.

But, yeah, the biggest seller is still the handmade silver and turquoise jewellery. Just imagine, cheap labour and primitive mines – you hardly even have to scratch the surface – alongside modern extraction technology. And my craftsmen are out of this world. You'll never guess who was wearing one of our pieces just last week. Can I just say former model of Eastern-European extraction with a presidential-sized clothing budget?

Time for a margarita, I think? And no cheap tequila and pre-made margarita mix, either. Those days are *way* behind me. Artisanal stone-crushed, double-distilled, small batch tequila, organic blue agave syrup and fresh local limes, *thank* you.

Pre-narrative Briefing M

On the isle of Jersey not far from where the war tunnels were constructed by the occupying forces there is a villa in whose garden is the sculpture of a peacock.

The present occupier of the villa is neither a member of the original family, nor the later unfortunates to whom these events happened, and, for a number of reasons, we may be assured that any recurrence is guarded against.

Nevertheless, that the intrusion did occur is both a matter of fact and worthy of consideration. Similar entries into the world may be expected where similar initial conditions exist. In this case the occult significance of the missing hour which existed (or ceased to exist) from the moment the German occupying forces insisted on moving the islands to Berlin time, until the eventual surrender and the return to Greenwich Mean Time, coupled with the grand folly of the tunnels themselves, a fortress against a counter- invasion that never occurred, that served only to hold a division of Nazi troops twenty miles away from the D-Day beaches where a sensible Germany would have deployed them.

This effect, of forces deployed within an emplacement that was in essence nothing but a trap, resonates on this island where historically almost every castle or fortification built has ended as a despairing dead-end for its constructors. War creates follies, of the spirit as much as of stone.

Colonel Malachi Yarrow: *The Missing Hour Occupancy – Hauntings of the Channel Islands. (2015)*

A Choice of Houses

Patrick and Georgina were a shoo-in for Daniel Omanta's daytime television programme, 'GREAT HOUSE CHALLENGE', the hot television find of 2010.

Pat was grave but personable – tall with hair that was still naturally blond, except for the intervention of a touch of grey at the temples. Gee (Patrick's nickname for her) was warm and outgoing, three years younger than him, and two inches shorter, green eyed, and intense on camera.

They'd had the casting director eating out of their hands from the moment she'd seen photographs of them. She was basically looking for two types of couples for the show, the ones the audience would root for and support – the people in essence that the punters identified with and wanted to be – and the rich oiks the public hated and wanted to see look stupid. Patrick and Gee were firmly in the

former category.

Dan Omanta – ex television chef, and pundit, holding onto the edge of the precipice between evening and daytime television for grim death – was looking to boost his 'family friendly' run through the housing market into something more worthy and sociological. Perhaps a series in which he followed families up the housing ladder over years, sharing their ups and downs, their triumphs and tragedies – a '7 Up' for the house buying classes. He sensed in Pat and Georgina, the bedrock on which he could make the bid for more exposure. Handsome and attractive, yet warm, and self-made. Old enough to be attractive to a later demographic, yet young enough to be aspirational to the mid twenty set. Not yet parents, but trying. He was practically rubbing his hands with the prospect of filming with them.

So it would be a shame that the episode they shot turned out so remarkable: too remarkable for selling in its entirety to any reputable TV company even off the so-called terrestrial channels. And it was a shame that before shooting stopped one of the couple was dead.

The format of 'GREAT HOUSE CHALLENGE' was more or less blatantly stolen from a number of other daytime house-buying shows. There was a fund-raising and de-cluttering element, which Patrick and Gee had taken in their stride. There was the chance to see three properties, specially selected by a team of specialist estate agents, and voted on for desirability by the phone-in-audience, and if the couple chose the one the audience voted for there was a prize to help fund renovations, or redecorating. Oh, and there was a mystery house. It was unfortunate, again in this case, what kind of mystery it constituted.

It was a large property (which was a slight point against it – as Pat and Gee weren't looking to start a family immediately, and four bedrooms and two bathrooms were just a tad more than they'd asked for) but then it was also secluded – no main roads, but a handy walk to the local station – and its price was a full ten thou under their budget. 'What's the matter with it?' Pat asked, spryly, pushing the apple green spring-loaded gate back and forth in his hands as if waiting for a creak or a rust flake, neither of which were forthcoming.

'Well it is in need of some tender loving care,' Daniel said, flashing a winning smile to defuse the cliché. In the garden a statue of a peacock, its colours worn away by time, leaving it faint and leprous, stood awaiting some TLC and a 60 minute make-over.

That night, in the local pub – the oldest on the island, now gastro-publically redeveloped – a Scottish man who'd lived in the area since 1960 – 'Still an

incomer!' – insisted on telling Gee all about the House's troubled history. She and Pat were being put up at the hotel next door by the television production company, and she'd taken the opportunity to grill the occupants of the restaurant about any potential flaws in the properties.

'It was after the end of the war. People were starting to come back to the island. Some of them had been among the twenty five thousand who'd fled to England when it was clear the Channel Islands were going to be demilitarised and left open to the Germans, some – far fewer – had been among the one thousand five hundred 'non-Jersey born' the Germans had sent to concentration camps in Europe. All of those who returned came back to things damaged and distorted by war.

The family who lived in that house then weren't rich – at least at first – and they had a son. They had the statue of the peacock that's still there now, in the garden. It had survived the war intact. One day in 1948 they woke up to find it had been painted white.

They didn't know why. But they were afraid it might be a threat, perhaps something to do with white feathers and cowardice. They'd left the island after all, to go to England and they'd not endured the occupation or the hunger. They cleaned off the paint and they tried not to be afraid.

The next day, the peacock was white again, and there was a letter pushed through their letter box. That letter at least actually existed, my wife's father saw it at the time. He lived in the house next door, and they showed it to him.

It read:

One apologies for the necessity but our requirements for a specific meeting place require the use of this property for a brief period.

Please accept the enclosed as payment in full for the use of your house for the period of Lent.

We trust that you will make any arrangements required to be absent before the 11th February. No guarantees can be given as to the continued existence of your good selves should you remain during our sojourn.

Yours Most Faithfully –

$$\infty \times \Sigma\hat{u} \neq \Delta_3$$

Secretary, the Cult of the White Peacock.

There was a more than adequate sum of money with the note. Enough to pay for the whole family to take a Lenten vacation, and then some, enough to pay my wife's father to forget about it, at least until things went bad.

So – the old man told the young couple – things continued for many years.

The householders took their holidays at lent, on their return they would find their peacock statue had been painted, or bleached white (on two occasions in the early sixties, it was seemingly replaced by another, one of porcelain and one of spectrally white marble, only for the 'new' statues to vanish in the week after Lent, leaving the original brightly coloured metal in their place.) Every year for sixteen years, there was a note, courteous enough yet vaguely sinister, and a sum of money – increasing generously enough each year to suggest the parties leaving it had no necessity to safeguard their expenses.

All would perhaps have been well, and the house occupied to this day, and hence unavailable for your perusal had it not been for the family's son.

He had been no more than a child when the statue had first turned, and he was in his seventeenth year in 1963, when the season of Lent approached. Now his parents, foolishly in my opinion, had never told the boy why their holidays always fell in the Lenten season, even if the pattern of the scholastic year did not always permit it. On such occasions they had certified their son, whose name was Emmanuel, as having been ill, and he had grown up without questioning a family pattern that had seemed to him as inviolate as the seasons, or the night and day.

Seventeen year olds, particularly in such rebellious times as the early sixties, even on so conservative an island as Jersey, were disinclined to take their holidays when their parents demanded, nor did they always wish to go where their parents were minded to take them. Emmanuel insistent on staying through Lent, citing his studies at de la Salle Christian College for Boys (founded 1917) whose fees – had he but known it – where almost entirely funded by his parents 'mysterious benefactors'. His parents had put their foot down in a mixture of brutal words and tears (both of which they would later much regret) and informed him roughly that he could do as he wished but that the family home would be shut up for renovations and he would have to stay upon the college grounds. By special arrangement with the new Brother Director of the College, which must have exceeded the normal services covered by his general fees, a room was made available for Emmanuel to cover the time of their 'unavoidable absence' – indeed some have said that the 1964 expansion of the school owed not a little to the family's donations.

Of what happened next, the old man said, we have only the statements made by the boy himself for evidence. These were not many, were confused in nature, and were at the time discounted as being, in all likelihood, part of a drug overdose. He was discovered raving in the garden of their house, having apparently broken into his own home through a small sashed window on the west side.

He had no apparent injuries apart from a peculiar mark on his right hand resembling

an old scar in the form of a spiral. Police suggestions that this was a sign of old drug use we can dismiss, if only because testimony from the Nurse at La Salle College was that he had shown no such stigmata at the time of a routine medical examination the month before. I learned all this in connection with my job, for I had been from 1960 employed as an embalmer at a funeral director's which was eventually involved in the matter, and I saw for myself the odd swooping curves apparently burned into or within the flesh of the boy's hand.

Their son died in the last week in Lent, in the year 1964 one year after his experiences. Aside from his three or four initial statements, he spoke not a word during that time, but continued to make extravagant drawings which – after every allowance had been made for their style – had in their content, much that chimed with his words to the neighbour, and the police surgeon, who recorded his accounts. His art was later published by a small publishing house based in France, though no one seems able to say who supplied it to them or by what right they propagated it.

It is considered a late flowering part of the Dadaist movement, I believe, by French academics, and from what little I have seen of it – I have never been able to acquire a copy of the book, no matter how diligently I wrote to the supposed address of the publishers throughout the eighties – his style, though in charcoal and pencil (the sheets I saw were photographed by doctors at the hospital where he was confined for that artistic but silent year), resembled the photographs of the sculptor and artist May Ray.

In one of his drawings, it is impossible to tell if he is drawing, a man, a peacock, or a succession of rotating circular metal plates suspended in the air whose shadows merely suggests the two former possibilities depending on the direction of the light source casting it.

His mother and father left the island, and so far as I know died later of a fever in foreign parts, somewhere in the middle-east during the middle of the seventies.

Before departing in 1965 the family sold the house to a property developer. He died in 1966, leaving no immediate family of his own and attempts by the courts to trace a next of kin proved futile. The house was eventually purchased from his executors, who were assigned by the island, by a company whose headquarters is in the Hague, and who it appears have made no use of the property until recently, save to maintain it, the work being done exclusively in the non-Lenten months.

'But if so, why is it now for sale', Patrick asked? And, 'But what did Emmanuel, say happened?' Gee asked – almost simultaneously.

'There is little more I can tell you,' the old man said. 'Perhaps somewhere the funds have run dry, or a different kind of care is needed. I can only tell you that I would consider it a poor time to be seeking to inspect the House, and I would

draw your attention to the White Peacock in the garden.'

'Surely it's just weathered,' Patrick said.

'Maybe,' said the old man, and while he was happy to drink another pint of ale, with a whisky chaser out of the expenses the television company were paying Patrick and Gee, he said no more on that subject.

Patrick and Gee however were not the kind of people to be easily put off (this was one of the characteristics that made them so televisual), and they plumped (a word Dan Omanta had heard Robert Robinson use on *Call My Bluff* on BBC 2 when he was growing up, and which he was trying to revive as one of his own catchphrases) to occupy the 'Peacock' House as their preferred 'Fortnight's Trial'. It was again perhaps unfortunate that their occupancy co-incided with Lent.

There were film cameras running. Some of the footage – re-edited, re-scored, and with a different narration – has been seen since on unscrupulous and exploitative programmes such as GHASTLIEST HOUSES OF HORROR, and UNSOLVED BLOODY MURDERS OF THE BRITISH ISLES.

Dan Omanta, never worked in front of the camera again[4], and Patrick and Gee were no longer a couple. He was dead, and she was in a coma.

The full-episode does not, we are told, remain in existence, and of the surviving footage three main sequences are known. In the first, filmed three days into their occupancy of the House, Pat and Gee are awakened by the screeching of peacocks from the front lawn. They investigate but found nothing, save for the fresh whiteness of the Peacock statue; now a shade of white so luminous as to register as a lens-flare or a special effect (or as some theorists have argued, a defect in the digital imaging). On their return to their bedroom they found the silver and green wallpaper, which was left over from one of the 1990s refreshes carried out on the orders of the company based in the Hague, covered in charcoal drawings. There were too many drawings and they were too detailed to have been made in the time they had been outside.[5] The drawings resembled the descriptions the old man had given them of the art produced by the son of the family, during his years in the mental institution.

Following this incident Dan Omanta managed to locate a copy of the French book *Les soixante-seize loups de Julian Maufrere - le dadaïste de l'île de la Manche*[6] and in the second surviving sequence Patrick and Gee point to the designs on the walls of their bedroom and read aloud from the book, the texts describing the specific

images that had appeared: the text being composed by the book's editor from the doctor's notes on Julian Maufrere's[7] case.

A picture of three Russian dolls, each of which is a wolf. The innermost wolf can only be seen as a faint grey outline, and yet it is clear that it is dressed in a military costume of the late 17th century, with lace and froggings at the throat and shoulders. The wolf in which that creature is embedded is necessarily larger but it is also better defined with muscles interwoven with a framework of clockwork. The third is a great mass of shadow, with a black band across its eyes like a domino mask. White runes are shown on its flesh by the absence of darkness. It is wearing a Top Hat.

A picture of a tall man, possibly a man, but from its shoulders descend what is either a mass of hair or tendrils. Its head however is bald like an egg, and from its brows rise seven pillars like a crown. Its arms have more joints than are found in human arms, perhaps as many as are found in a **[reference deleted from briefing for your safety and convenience]***'s leg. Its hands are large and have six fingers and two thumbs apiece. It rests them on the heads of two wolves one of which is charcoaled so as to appear black, and the other of which is charcoaled as whiteness in a space surrounded by charcoal.*

A wolf large enough (by implication) to swallow a Sun – for it has a flaming orb in its jaws, around which twelve smaller bodies orbit – which wolf is shown cocking its leg against an immense tree, from the branches of which a squirrel (perhaps equally vast) regards it with terror. In the stream of its piss against the great tree, two human figures – a man and a woman – are shown drowned.

A row of distorted figures sketched as on a shelf[8]. A thing like a narrow naked man with scales and the head of a fish. A creature with outsized limbs whose head is flat and whose neck is a mass of lightly drawn scars, feathered with masterstrokes in the charcoal. A white bulbous mass with many pit-black eyes. A black evening dress body topped with a set of fangs in a vague blur. A wolf half changed into a man. A man half changed into a wolf.

The second sequence ends with Gee freaking out and knocking the book out of Patrick's hand. A camera man (presumably) who should not have interacted with the scene, nevertheless reaches out for the book. The shadow of his hand which is all that appears in shot over its brown velvet cover with its gold embossing is distorted by the angle, and appears for a moment to have two thumbs.

In the third known sequence things are seen to happen which have never been satisfactorily explained. Gee is seen asleep and a figure appears moving behind her bed. It wears black and has a mask of bone, but it touches her forehead lightly

and bending whispers something in her ear. Unlike the thing seen in a moment, it does not appear to be actively hostile. The bone-masked figure though does not intervene between Patrick and the thing with which he is struggling. Perhaps it has no time, perhaps it cannot. The figure is not seen to depart, for the focus shifts suddenly. Patrick is abruptly there in the foreground and his skin is flowing away from his face and body, into a swarm of bugs that hovers around him: a swarm that casts the shadow of a creature part wolf, part peacock. There is a partly surviving soundtrack to this sequence. The whisper of the bone-masked creature is almost indecipherable though the words *beauty sleep* and *limitation* have been suggested as being part of it. The words of the swarm are however clear enough, though meaningless.

Ours, ours, ours at this hour, ours at this time, ours under these stars.

Ours, ours, ours by pact, ours by purchase, ours by blood, ours in the

Cult of the White Peacock.

Pre-narrative Briefings N, O

'Everything ends in a death: that is as without meaning as it is inevitable: what is there to say against that, except lies.'
'One does not love or hate: One is not a person nor a gestalt.'
'You're not looking at a King, oh no, no, no.'

Aphorisms of the Enemy: The Book of Lies.

Well, what *I* think, he said, doggedly, is that all this anchoring of the web, and such like is wrong. Fixing things that shouldn't ought to be fixed ain't nature. Linearity just stops things happening in interestin' ways. It'd be a jolly sight more interesting if things happened all at once, or you couldn't tell what order things went in. It'd be a jolly sight more surprising than all these ole theory-instructors imagine. Not that they've got any sense or they'd know that an ounce of p'radox is worth a pound of theory. I think fixin' things spoils 'em. And I don't see what's so lesser about the lesser species! Seems to me they have all the fun an' we just watch 'em and watch ourselves watchin' em. They do things like havin' proper wars with swords, and launching space rockets, and worshippin' idols, and sailing on oceans and huntin' tigers, and makin' up languages, and dying. I don't suppose I'll ever get to do anything like that, and no more will any of you. Gosh, they had a big war once before we were ever thought of, against the Yssgaroth, and it was

all over and done and sprayed in plastidiamond seal before we even got near it. It would be just like the Great Houses, he said darkly, if they never fought anyone ever again except stupid clones or robot things that get beat before we can even see 'em. Maybe I'll have start a war myself. If no one else does. I bet I could think of some really good things to fight. Ghosts, or pirates or spiders or Ghost Spider Pirates…

- - from *the apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Grandfather Paradox* as recorded by St. Richmal of the Just Observance.

Houses of Cards

Everything seen, heard or perceived must be trapped within the electrical flesh of the mind. We have always known this.

This is the only way to ensure that the Great Houses cannot access our knowledge. Recordings of any sort must exist, at least partially, in 'reality'. Physicality is, in and of itself, a huge vulnerability. Anything that can be touched can be stolen, lost, destroyed, folded, spindled or mutilated. This is, of course, the reason that we do not write, record or draw any information; anything we produce can be used by the enemy. Memory alone is not completely inviolate, but it is safer – particularly when shared and checked.

Corruption occurs with any memory recording system, physical or biochemical, which is why we cannot insist enough on memories being collaborated, as often and to the greatest extent possible. Memories will be averaged together, blended through discussion and agreement. The odd pieces can be set aside for future reference, but not used for main decision making. An informal sorting system decides what the actual memory will be. We are Compound, in two senses.

It is required for all excursions outside of the perimeter of the compound to egress in groups of six or more. Understandably, groups of less than six are allowed re-entrance, but face charges if found to be responsible for the death or desertion of comrades. We understand that there will be collateral damage, which is why it is never acceptable to leave the perimeter as an individual.

The One memory derived from multiples is divine, but the One memory from one is far less desirable.

In the unfortunate event of individual memory, as we realize sometimes occurs, it is of utmost importance to have the individual debriefed by at least three techs,

who will then discuss their discussions with the individual, to therefore decide and set to memory the official memory, remembering any differences in recollection. In mutuality there is strength.

Since institution of these policies our sector has had no breaches of any sort by the enemy.

This is how we have maintained ourselves through this isolation.

Anyone caught using physical recordings of any sort will be repurposed, utilising their cells to the best means possible for our people.

Outside of the perimeter is desolation. The full scope of the desolation cannot even be seen by most; three dimensional creatures cannot see the realities of this…we hate to call it a place…this ever-changing disaster that is never, ever good or solid. It is more of an 'area', a thing that is, yet isn't, and hides on the edges of everything, like a nightmare that follows into awakening.

It has had many names, as most planets do. It has often teemed with life: a green and blue playground. It has been cold, ice-covered and dusty. It has been a poisonous stew of volcanic activity and meteorological bombardment.

Our soul swells with the beauty of the ugliness of it all.

The City of Brotherly Love: Philadelphia. A living, breathing inverted contradiction. Colours change all over: the crisp, clean blue of Old City is the same blue that glints off of the cross atop a collapsing church steeple in North Philly. Glowing brightly upon the rats, yet sparsely in neighbourhoods, the disgusting amber of the street light is the same as the clock glass in City Hall, staining the polluted skies.

The city that is famous for an improperly-made bell that cracked when it was first struck. Two attempts at fixing it were failures, so we may as well make it a tourist attraction.

Epicureans tout the cuisine, dining in restored brick mansions of the old rich. The working poor 'scarf' down hoagies and cheesesteaks for lunch, in the short time left after waiting in line at lunch trucks and store-front windows.

Police, corrupt and honourable alike, patrol the areas, hoping they will make it through another day alive, and get to go home to their families.

Hitchbot was a Canadian robot, built as a social experiment. He was cheering up the world, one ride at a time. He even had his own website, so that attentive planetary natives could track his travels. We didn't have to, as we were neither native nor interested. Of course, the futures were known.

We are Sanjae'ktin, One of The Six selected to leave the perimeter. It is an

honor and a glory to have a mind trained well enough to be able to understand the orders, a body strong and agile enough to follow the orders to fruition, and a memory dependable enough to allow accurate review, even if the other Five aren't, by the terror of the Great Houses, there.

It is amazing how something seemingly so ridiculous could possibly change so much for the future of this hinge planet and outward to the edges of The Great Dissolve.

We have our victim: a ridiculously primitive robot that was designed to request rides from strangers and make conversation. There was no need to restrain him, we just went to where he was sitting, and offered him a ride. He cheerily explained that we needed to place him into the mini-bus.

'This is a nice bus,' said Hitchbot. 'What do you call it? Does it have a name?'

'We call it One Run. You are our prisoner. We must sacrifice you to allow the disorderly incorrect timeline to proceed.' It is a positive pleasure to be able to tell a sacrifice the truth and not have to put up with a lot of sqwarking. Sarahn'tzig did her job, like a professional, patiently strapping Hitchbot into a seatbelt. Hitchbot, pre-programed with the gift of the gab wouldn't shut up.

'There were many tribes in South America who sacrificed victims for their gods. We are, however, in Philadelphia. City of Brotherly Love. If I were human, perhaps I would try a hoagie, or a cheesesteak, HAAAHHH, HAAAHHHH! I do not have a stomach. Feel free to stop for food or take me home for dinner, if you would like. I believe you probably have a stomach. Also, please plug me into your cigarette lighter, I am starting to feel faint.'

'We would tend to think that there would be less danger to us if your power supply were depleted. We would imagine a jolt of electricity would not, necessarily, be conducive to our staying alive. If we are dead, our memories will be lost.'

'I have never met a dead person,' Hitchbot chirped on, chipperly. Its voice was presumably that of one of its human creators. Calmly Sarahn'tzig walked up toward the front. Speaking briefly with Zhamir'ftar, she began rooting through a box of junk,.

'We think that you were getting on our nerves,' We informed the robot. For fun, we reached over and ripped his floppy arms off.

'OH! I understand! A song to make our journey go a little faster?' Hitchbot continued, not waiting for an answer. 'You are my sunshine, my only sunshine…'

'DUCT TAPE? ANYBODY?' came a plea from the front seats.

‘You make me hapEEEEEEEEEEE when skies are grey.’

Glee was so apparent on her face, when Sarahn’tziq brought back a crowbar, that none of us were shocked when she started swinging and decapitated our simple little victim with four uneven and discordant blows. She smiled as she picked up the head, set it aside, and yelled for Zhamir’ftar to pull over in a dimly lit, isolated place to dispose of the socially over-enthusiastic coffee can. The Six of Us giggled.

Sarahn’tzig danced with the torso for a minute. ‘You’ll never know, DEAR, how much we don’t loh-ove you. Please do take this sunshine away.’

‘We feel almost like we need to roll in dirt after dealing with that level of friendliness,’ we said to the others. Grunts and groans indicated their agreement.

A few minutes of bumpy driving brought us to a relatively isolated spot. We sat the obnoxious mess on the curb, placing the arms next to him. Wires were ripped out, as well. This was not ordered, but we allowed the other five to harmlessly blow off some steam, as they say here.

The ‘brain’ was ours, as per the orders. The team that briefed us referred to the low memory piece of junk as a ‘brain’. Perhaps this was a joke.

Soon we will be safely within the perimeter. Our memories and this ‘brain’ will surely mean a level increase.

Roads are a new concept for us, but of all the roads we have been on, Route 76 around Philadelphia – the Schuylkill Expressway – is a divinely grotesque mass of roadwork. Zhamir’ftar drove like he channelled the spirit of the road. Maybe he did, we never asked him. It was almost a ballet performed with absolute malice to the other dancers. Zhamir’ftar is one to respect.

It was Wessynd’ona who noticed the tractor trailer, initially: dirty white with the words ‘Great Houses’ crisply written in blue Copperplate Gothic, trimmed with gold. It barrelled up the highway and pulled up, parallel to us, with only a small Volkswagen Bug between us. Cleverly, the driver of the Bug hit their brakes, so as not to get smashed between us and the truck, as the truck moved to be next to us.

Some species see their lives flash before them, in near death moments. This is another unfortunate limitation of those trapped in the third dimension.

We tend to have time slow, so that we can review the possible actions and outcomes. We grabbed the brain, zippering it into our biker jacket, and prepared for the crash to come.

The truck, running alongside of us, pulled to the right, trapping us, moving us along the guard rail. Bright sparks lit up the night and the blood curdling sound of metal on concrete was palpable: screams of a machine set to die. More slowly

than any reality could be, the bus began to fold. Repeatedly, the truck used its might to pulverise us against the wall. We were thrown, smashed, dismembered, and lights flashed like we had never seen, through my mind, searing with pain. Then we knew nothing.

(Finally, the grating metallic noise stopped. The tractor trailer pulled away, leaving a mangled tangle of metal producing odd hissing, clicking and thunking noises.)

Slowly, we awoke. An oxygen mask had been placed over my nose and mouth, the gas hissing from the edges, stinging my eyes…or are there tears stinging my eyes? Do my eyes even sting? I closed them.

'The others are dead, I think,' a higher-pitched voice. We could see they were wrong, Sanjae'ktin who had held the brain, was still living, her skin had not turned hard. Sanjae'ktin would recover if left unmedicated. We wondered if the people of this planet had any concept of our physiology. It would be best to permit them to investigate us so that Sanjae'kin might retain the brain. Deciding this we attempted to arise, but arms seemed to reach out as if from nowhere, to firmly strap me to a gurney. Vision was fading as we realised the hissing gas was not oxygen. We were not in an ambulance from the planet we had been on. This was a place of the Faction Paradox. We lost consciousness. Only Sanjae'ktin now held our hope.

'Remove the clothing, then we shall start.' Walking around, she brought several lengths of thread-wrapped wire to the table. The bare ends were held up for display, wispy insulation draping down, ends unravelled, not stripped.

'Please observe my every move,' Cousin Trna instructed her wards. It was difficult to teach these processes without direct observation. 'You have already learned the points for this type of creature. It is easily tested: if you are unsure, push lightly against it. There should be a noticeable jump...perhaps an involuntary noise.'

The thing on the table flailed a leg as the probe pressed its neck.

'You, you and...' Cousin Trna liked to engage the shy ones, so she stood as high as she could. 'You! In the back! Yes, you. The three of you shall make much ado! Align these!'

The students each took a wire, lining it up against the proper nerve clusters.

'Cousin Martayne, would you please check to make sure that the feeder for the punch cards is filled?'

Just to be on the safe side, he added a few more, then signalled all was ok, there.

Cousin Trna reached out her hand and pulled the giant wooden-handled switch down.

‘Grandfather, your being, not being, may bring us ours!’

The threads wrapped around skin, plunging the wires deeply into the creature's meaty flesh. There was a spasm and a short, screeching howl, then no sound or movement. ‘We have a link!’

The monitor above displayed a scene of a crushed bus and emergency vehicles.

My eyes were blinded by unconsciousness, only to be blinded by an explosion as they opened. Six as One is now, simply, one, as the others are nowhere to be seen. We calculated this risk. The brain is safe. There is no sadness, as our plan isn't foiled. It may be that I – strange word in my mouth now – will survive/return without the others as long as I have it. Standing, brushing the dirt and leaves from myself, the pain was sucked deep within. I…no, we (We had standards to maintain even now) were trained for this. Our brains were much more than this mass of wires and microchips in our jacket could ever be. And yet to the Compound Masters somehow, the brain in my jacket was worth as much, or more, than the brain in my head. Perhaps far, far more, and I (no, no, NO!) We were the one of the One to bring it to our sector. We would re-join.

Concentrating on the when/where we were, we trotted down the hill, to the street below. A residential neighbourhood, but there are still taxis that journey off of the main thoroughfares.

Stepping off of the curb, I waved an arm at a taxi. I: it is like a dagger – the sharp length of it. Why am I alone? Could none of the others have ‘voided their fates? I would curse them, for making me I’lone.

‘Where'r'ya headed, Mister?’ the foul-smelling creature behind the plexiglass screen asked.

‘Please take me to Liberty Place.’

‘You got it! Looks like the Phils are gonna do real good this season, ya know?’ He looked at me in the mirror to see if I was listening.

‘I don't know. I don't follow sports. I don't want to chat, either.’ It is easier to say the word than feel it, but not much. How do they stand it, these lone apes, these lesser singletons?

‘Hey, I was just tryin'a conversate wit' ya.’

‘Yes, you were,’ I agreed. This didn't seem to make him any happier, in fact, it

seemed to make him seem somewhat deflated. I smiled at his discomfort.

The rest of the ride passed in relative silence.

‘That'll be $18.50,’ the cab driver announced, as he put the car into park, turning around. I handed him a $20.

‘Hey, that ain't much of a tip! I gotta feed my kids this way!’

I looked at him, attempting to feign a kinder, gentler face. ‘Would you like me to give you a better tip?’ I asked.

‘Well, yeah, I would,’ he replied, looking plaintively at me.

‘Ok! I can do that! Your tip is: you should find a new planet. Your planet should not exist. You should not have evolved. You are from nothing, you are nothing.’ Cheerily I chirped the news to him, and got out of the car.

One Liberty Place is a glistening tower of steel and glass, the first skyscraper built in Philadelphia. The ‘gentlemen's agreement’ not to build any building taller than the William Penn City Hall statue was broken in the 80s, as were so many other things. Sparkle above meaning, others followed, but One was first, glistening blue and white, perverted reflections of sky. At night, a lighthouse for the wealthy.

‘HOLD THE DOOR!’ So close to the prize, the elevator doors threatened to delay my glory for longer, but a hand reached out to prevent its closure. ‘Ah, thanks!’ I was genuinely thankful.

‘No problem! What level?’ She enquired, looking me up and down.

‘Fourteen,’ I replied, smiling. It wasn't hard. I just remembered how these humans taste, when cooked properly. The taste of them in six mouths – reminiscently – shared. Delicious. She pushed button 14 for me. If I had the confidence of We, we would have asked her number: asked if she’d go for a bite later. We can still snigger inwardly.

Nearly ‘home’-. We could feel the pain, tucked away, but didn't let it override my sense of purpose. The elevator announced our arrival with an entirely unattractive ‘glonk’. Perhaps the noise was purposefully unattractive, as Our Original Planners wouldn't want the elevator to be populated with humans wanting to hear the wonderful noises of the elevator. They do actually gather just to listen to noises. They do many stupid and unnecessary things. They clutter the world with them, when they might be free-range meat. Their buildings though have a certain grandeur, and can hide many secrets. The fourteenth floor is always silent. The floor itself is carpeted richly. Vacuum trails always run in parallel lines along the floor, and the smell of the vacuum lingers. I have never seen anybody enter or exit the rooms, myself included. The things that follow the vacuum trails are perfect security, but they are not anybody.

There was definitely a spring in my step as I strolled to the end of the hall and pulled open the door to the stairwell. I took the stairs two at a time, until I reached the first landing. I placed my key in the wall, feeling the cement slip away, and stepped into my sector.

I took a deep breath of MY air, as I took the brain from my jacket. The smell of the where/when I was at could not infiltrate into our area. Soon I would be Us again.

Every cell of my being, every thought in my head turned to pain and collapsed.

'So, there we are! See how easy that was?' The creases in the bones of Cousin Trna's mask almost seemed to smile. She lifted the switch and the view of inside the perimeter faded to a white dot on the monitor, then nothing. 'With creatures of that kind, the disorientation of loneliness is quite sufficient to remove their common sense. Two or three of them would have compared notes and memories, and understood that they had been released on the supposition that they would reveal their lair. One alone, a singleton – well, they were tracked straight to their Compound, their floor 14, their hidden sector of space and time, stuck to the side of a skyscraper like an oak-gall on an apple.' Her hands had been moving while she spoke.

There is a sound, or a feeling, someplace between 'crunch' and 'squish'. Cousin Trna took special glee in creating this sound for her students. She's a fraud. It's done by cupping air in the hands, there doesn't *have* to be a dissection subject at all.

She instructed them on removing the liquids from various spaces within the carcass, carefully placing the tubes in a velvet lined wooden box, laying each tube in its indentation, then closing the glass top.

Lifting the stack of punch-cards from the exit chute, she placed them upon the table, next to the vials.

'The data is for the Great Houses – once we have adjusted certain aspects of it, so that they draw the conclusions we desire – the biodata is for OUR great family! Father Stendec will be pleased to examine these creatures for the beastiaries.' She waved her hands quite gracefully. 'The implosion vortex in the brain is for the Compound. Yes,obviously it was a trap. Little Cousin Zeller set the Hitcherbot loose knowing it would come here eventually, an advantage of a truly four-dimensional strategy.' She brightened, and brushed gunk off her hands.

'Who wants to see a magic trick?' Oh, why bother even asking, she thought, that's

why we're here, right? She took a handful of the dust that had fallen off of the body during the cellular-confession, and sprinkled it onto the cards. The cards stood and leaned and slid, shuffled and rearranged, and there were great houses.

'Great Houses...of Cards,' she said. 'And like the Great Houses, vulnerable.'

And so we clapped. And blew them down.

Pre-narrative Briefing P

The subject Patient Y is suffering from a fixed paranoid delusion. He imagines he is being held in a hospital and suffering from some form of PTSD, as a result of his taking part in a 'War'. Among his delusionary accounts of this war he has claimed to be:

Fighting against a race of praying mantis-amazons that wear human suits in order to bite the heads off male sexual aggressors. (Male guilt?)

Contending with a species of under-earth horrors, planning to invert the universe and turn all the planets into stifling bubbles of stagnant air pent without exit in light-years of solid rock. While experiencing this delusion he accounts for global warming with the supposition that their campaign has triumphed here, and for a time he maintained that the stars were carefully placed quartz crystals on the far-side of our cavern.

Engaged in exposing the vast conspiracy of a Cult said to worship a White Peacock, which is made up not only of *real people* or 'reps' but also of fictional entities, and iconic representations of evil.

The last survivor of a work of fiction himself, stranded in a reality where everything has – ever so slightly – the wrong name attached to it. (For instance he asserts that *Finn Foster* is called something marginally different, but finds it impossible to articulate what).

In his mid-fifties and retired from what was undoubtedly a comfortable sinecure in the mainland's civil service, it is my considered belief, that he is simply a fabulist: a Walter Mitty like character forever listening for the ta-pocketa, pocketa, pocketa of complex machinery as the scenery of the universe is shifted around him.

MS found in an abandoned Psychotherapist's Office.

The Enemy – The Hole in Everything

Roderick found the leaflet pushed through the wooden gap between his front door and the step, one day – although he had a perfectly usable letter box (of the European sort, in the door itself), as if the fly-poster had been unable to reach up to it, weighed down by some infinite and impossible gravity, or had slivered it in from flat-land or another two dimensional world.

The leaflet resembled the ads for pizza which were the most common of the things, other than bills, to come through the letter box rather than the gap, more than it resembled the things that most commonly came through the gap, which were dead leaves and pill bugs. But it had a certain resemblance to dead leaves, which was that its colours were autumnal and muted as if it had been lying somewhere slightly damp and dusty for a long time before being dragged around in a pile and pushed through the gap.

The leaflet showed a man – probably a man, for though his head was stylised and he was looking away from the viewer he seemed to be wearing a brownish business suit – gazing at something, and then a second picture in which the back of the man's head (if it was a man's head) became even more a smudged fingerprint blur of a thing, as if it was smeared out into the picture so that the man – if it was a man – wasn't a man any longer with a head that was distinct from his suit or the air, or the thing, whatever it was, that he was so diligently looking at, but a suit that ended in a kind of fungal bloom of spreading uncertainty until it was part this, whatever this was, and part that, whatever that was.

Roderick read, the title of the leaflet, as he turned on his coffee maker. Its title was **The Enemy – The Hole in Everything: Your Doorway to Null.** It began:

Anyone can construct this mechanism, in the privacy of their own home, or their own brain, if they have a home of their own or a brain of their own. It is a sequence of thoughts or a collection of wood and iron that forms a pattern which is like a sequence of thoughts in-so-far as such a pattern can be, or such a sequence of thoughts can be. It is the pattern which destroys patterns, so to look at it is to cease.

You may say – Well I have a television already. Thank you very much! – but even the most bland and asinine television schedule is tainted with the spore of life, with the lie of action, with the unceasing illusion of movement as accomplishment, whereas to cease is to know true nirvana, and to step for a moment off the great circle of the

wheel, whose motion is the endless nausea and vertigo of life and its tawdry whirligig of illusionary progress. Or you may say – Well I can have a sleep, Mister Leaflet-sender – and this is so, but even the best sleep is troubled by the simulacrum of a simulacrum, which is the swirl of dreams which are fragments of fragments and make only the sense which might be expected of things which are not and never can be real, and are only copies of things which are not and never can be real also. Sleep therefore does not heal – so far as anything can be healed – rather it strains the subject in a different way, but that strain is not in itself good even though it can sometimes act against the strains that the false motion of the wheel imparts in the daylight hours, assuming the subject is sleeping at night and moving and being moved by the wheel by day. Further you may say – Well I'm quite happy as I am – but this is a thing you can say, only as you might say – Well I'm a grey elephant – if you believe you are a grey elephant. For without the chance to cease for a time from the wheel, you cannot know what it is to be happy nor unhappy, nor what it is to be a person and not a grey elephant, nor a grey elephant and not a person. You should ask yourself instead, what do I have to do that is better than taking the opportunity to cease? You deserve the chance to gaze upon the nothingness that is the un-pattern and to see that everything only matters to other clumps of matter to whom it matters only while they are in the false orbit of the motion of the wheel. To cease is to cease to fear. To cease is to cease to decay. To cease is to be, that which is not being. The enemy of all that is, is the friend of that which is not.

Roderick, rested his coffee cup on the leaflet while he watched the news on the television. The news was about some people somewhere else firing rockets at some other people, and the other people shelling the first people. The coffee cup made a halo of damp coffee around the head of the second man – the one whose head was part of everything else and like everything else, while also being quite unlike itself.

After he'd watched some more of the news, which was now about a famous comedian having committed suicide, and a famous singer being suspected of child abuse, and a famous duck that could roller-skate being given a chance to immortalise its webbed footprints outside a theatre: Roderick decided to build the Door to Null. He decided to build it in his garage. He opted to build the physical shape, rather than to think the thoughts that would make the shape in his mind, although the right inner fold of the leaflet set out the thoughts he would need to think, because although he wasn't a very good builder, the physical shape seemed simple, and the thoughts seemed complicated – being almost a set of equations and almost a poem – so far as he could tell, having just glanced at them long enough to decide that the carpentry on the left inner fold of the leaflet looked less

complicated.

His neighbours later told the police they had heard hammering. But neither they nor the police ever discovered where Roderick's head had gone. And since it is not possible to hammer off one's own head, even if you have a hammer and a leaflet, and since the leaflet seemed to have disappeared when the police found the body, after the neighbours had called the police after the smell had got so strong from the garage, and the police would have had no reason to look for a leaflet, as opposed to a murderer who also seemed to have disappeared, no one ever knew exactly what had occurred.

But those of us who push the leaflet under your doors, who some call the Enemy, want to make it clear, that the two methods though different are of equal difficulty and effectiveness and if you are not certain you can master the right inner fold of the leaflet, it does not suffice to run at the left inner fold for there is no difference in the effort required of you. As it happens Roderick was successful in ceasing, and to be applauded, but he might not have been, and that would have been dreadful, as the world continues to be dreadful.

Pre-narrative Briefing Q [Poem, 2017].

The neighbourhoods are getting farther apartThe thing is reaching up, up, up, from between the sidewalk cracksThey smell of perfumed paper flowersThe baptism is beginning

In days of yore, recall strolling through gardenswith the fresh eyes of a child, seeing yet unseeing. The vivid color of flowers was black and white, the shade to which the oldest memories faded. The saccharine sun blinding with ethereal light, a lens flare on an ancient photograph

No one noticed the seeds that were planted, under the cover of a moonless night No one noticed when cement split open, and tiny tendrils reached to touch the dawnthe days ticked on until the thing's arms grew thick over everything.

Travel between the neighbourhoods ceased. Each neighbourhood grew restless imagining what might be lurking on the next block. Bands formed, each painting itself in a different colour. The neighbourhoods sat in anticipation, waiting for the fabled war to arrive. Rumours circulated of great beasts in the shape of humans, lurking deep within the forest, their flesh now but a phantom of a greater body.

The thing had found its way inside them,the thorny vines poured from their facescutting the skin of foe and self alike. Butthey could not see it in themselves, only in the form of the enemy. The neighbourhoods are getting farther apart.The forest, it grows ever larger stillFlowers lay upturned on the groundIn the garden where we once strolled,The baptism is complete; the war continues.

Lesley Drakken

The Enemy of My Enemy is My Enemy

Sometimes it began with the chicken, and sometimes the egg. And sometimes, it began with the Colonel's Special Recipe Bargain Bucket. It began in 1953. It began in 1960. It began in 1965. It began many years from now, in the heart of a black sun.

Born to poverty, they learned early that escape came in the form of the written word; the Public Library provided their tunnels, Tom, Dick and Harry. They dug their way to freedom. Behind them, the tunnel was a black hole. Ahead of them, the light at the end. Between their ears, seeds took root in rich soil and worlds were born and bloomed.

1953

In Hampton, James Sheldrake made his way into the world. Blind in his right eye and deaf in his left ear, it was an early indication that he would always look just that bit further and listen more keenly. Things that held him one step away from his fellows.

In the street outside the hospital, lit by the sickly illumination of a streetlamp, a nondescript couple looked up at the windows into the maternity ward. Their clothes black, with no hint of reflection from above. As though the material swallowed every photon.

Time froze as the nurse held the infant, her arm raised to deliver a gentle smack. Anticipation. Infinite possibilities folding down and down. The baby's eyes sprang open, and he began to cry, the howls reverberating into the streets.

Without a word, the couple departed.

1960

North of the border, Gideon Barrow breathed his first lungful of air. In years to come, he would claim to remember every detail of his birth, recalled under the influence of peyote and subsonic trance music. As a professional comics writer, he would get two issues of material out of the recollection.

What he would not remember was the man and woman sitting in the waiting room in the very black trouser suits. Unlike the others waiting for news of their loved ones, they showed no fatigue, no caffeinated excitement from late night dashes to the emergency room. They were merely present. If anyone had been asked to describe them, they would have given only the vaguest of accounts. Ethnicity? Age? People were caught up in their own stories, awaiting news of additions to family lines. Could they really be expected to recall two among so many? Could you?

But that wasn't really it.

'Mister Barrow?' One of the nurses bustled through the double doors into the waiting room, her voice cutting over the general hubbub. A stocky young man, until then sitting hunched forward, legs wide, hands clasped, looked up from his thoughts.

'Here, hen.'

'If you'd like to come with me, there's a little boy who'd like to meet his daddy.'

Barrow Senior leapt to his feet, grinning broadly and shaking the hand of anyone near enough as he went through to the theatre.

Without fanfare, the couple rose as one, and followed the procession into the corridor. No handshakes or acknowledgements were offered.

As the elder Barrow bumbled into the recovery room, he made to shut the door behind him, only to be confronted by the black-clad duo. He stood there awkwardly holding the door open without response. Their gaze was not on him; it was focused on the room behind him.

The sounds of baby Gideon's grizzling died into a contented chuckle.

By now, it had been too long to just shut the door on the strangers, and Barrow felt he should say something.

'Ah'm a daddy!' He beamed at the woman, and gave a curt nod to the man and gently shut them out of the moment.

The woman broke the silence. 'You think we need one more?'

The man gave no reply.

'We'll get one more.'

No-one saw them leave.

1965

Michelle Louise Montague was born in Easton, downwind of Bristol. Humble origins, but she was raised with love and in a place of words. The family moved often, but wherever they wandered, they filled their homes with books and

encouraged Michelle to explore the worlds within them.

Mr Montague's Astra pulled up sharply at the kerb outside his house. He dashed round to the passenger side to help his wife and new-born baby daughter out of the car.

He fussed as to whether he needed to help them into the house, but Mrs Montague just tutted.

'We'll be fine, Martin. Just get the bags.'

He heaved a great heavy suitcase out of the boot, which he described as an overnight bag. It never hurt to be prepared, he always said.

Even loaded down with the case, he still rushed past his wife and baby to reach the front door ahead of them, key at the ready.

'Put the kettle on, there's a love.'

While they were in the hallway, a black clad couple stood in the lounge, looking at the selection of books on the shelves that dominated the room. The man looked to the woman for approval. She nodded.

By the time the Montagues reached the lounge, they were long gone.

1967

The earliest memory Montague could recall was the birth of her sister Donna. Here was someone who could accompany her on adventures, someone to boss around.

As Donna sucked up the majority of attention that her parents used to lavish exclusively upon her, Michelle grew bolder, and pushed her way back into the spotlight however she could.

1969

No bells rang out in Coatbridge to announce the birth of Bobbie Buchanan. Rumours of the presence of a coterie of freemasons or a jackal at the birth site – mostly put about by Buchanan himself – remain unsubstantiated.

Were there any mysterious witnesses present to observe the birth?

Not to anyone's recollection.

1970

Unable to drive due to his limited eyesight, Sheldrake grew to like walking. The Hampton streets beneath his feet connected him to the heartbeat of the town. Raised among the downtrodden, he became their champion, their voice, their shaman. A view not shared by his grammar school headmaster, who expelled him for dealing psychedelics to his schoolmates. Certain elements of 1970 Hampton

were unready to have the doors of perception opened to them.

With an unusual degree of malice, Sheldrake's head was not content with expulsion.

As Sheldrake sat outside the headmaster's office, where the prefect had ordered him to remain and await his punishment, a couple of parents that he had never encountered before came out of the office. Their matching black suits made them look to Sheldrake like members of a religious sect.

'Rest assured, the matter will be given my utmost attention,' the headmaster called after them, but they did not break stride until they reached the exit. His voice sounded indignant, but his military background left him with that as his default mode.

After Sheldrake's exclusion, the head made it his mission to contact any further education establishments that Sheldrake might have applied to in order to continue his studies, painting him as the worst influence that could befall their hallowed halls. Any employer writing to request a reference from him, was similarly discouraged.

'Dear Sir,

I thank you for your correspondence with regard to providing a character reference for James Sheldrake, a former pupil here at Hampton Grammar School. While it pains me to speak ill of a former charge, I feel honour-bound to warn you against employing this individual in any capacity. It is my deeply held belief that were you to do so, he would prove to be a corrosive influence upon your workplace, and I should feel somewhat responsible if I did not speak my piece.

Yours faithfully,

Edgar Hyphen-Hyphen, Captain (rtd)

Headmaster'

Forced to seek employment among firms that did not seek a schoolmaster's reference, Sheldrake found himself working in the tannery for six quid a week. The days were long, physically arduous and filled with the tang of curing sheepskin, the alkaline stink of lime and piss; the gore of skinned animals, and workmates who would alleviate the wretchedness of the job by tossing the occasional sheep testicle at each other. During his time at the tannery, Sheldrake developed an almost supernatural talent for ducking.

Michelle Montague put pen to paper and wrote her first complete piece of fiction.

Tortoise, both title and protagonist, was born from Montague's longing for a

pet. Her parents would not allow one, so she conjured him.

In the story, Tortoise overslept and woke up in the future, when his owner, a thinly-veiled stand-in for the author, was old and wrinkled, with long white hair. The story ended when Tortoise grew tired and went back to sleep, only to find on waking that his adventures had all been a dream.

Her first critic, Mrs Montague described it as 'very nice, dear.'

'Well, get it published,' the five year old Michelle replied, much to her mother's surprise.

'Where does she get it from?' Her mother shook her head.

'Not from me,' said her father.

1974

Cupid drew back his bow, and Jim Sheldrake uttered the most important two words of his year, saying 'I do' to Edith Neville.

After an embarrassing childhood being dragged around military bases by his father, an activist with ties to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and lesser-known groups, Barrow missed him now he was gone.

His father's devotion to the cause outweighed loyalty to his family; they drifted further and further apart, until one day, Barrow Senior disappeared on one of his excursions, and did not return.

In hindsight, Barrow felt he had been more of a decoy than a son. Other kids played football with their dads; he was a cover story to throw off suspicion when military police discovered them trespassing on nuclear bases. He was an accomplished storyteller; something that rubbed off on Gideon.

1976

Freckles and National Health spectacles marked Montague out at school, but it was her writing that really *othered* her among her classmates. At the age of eleven, she finished her first novel, concerning seven cursed rings and their various owners. She showed it to no one. Nevertheless, two people read it.

Bright as a button, she rarely had more than one foot in the classroom, and one in the Greatwood. School reports applauded her personality and academic achievements, while pointing out how much higher she could reach if she wasn't away with the fairies quite so much.

1977

Three years after walking down the aisle, Sheldrake graduated from bollock

ducker to office clerk for the Gas Board. Eight hours a day, five days a week, fifty weeks a year, with only factory fortnight to look forward to, when Hampton ground to a halt and blue collar workers dragged their families to the coast for their annual holiday.

His house no longer stank of the day job. Instead, the prevailing odour had become Old Spice.

Again, two words rewrote his life.

'I'm pregnant,' Edith said.

Faced with the prospect of remaining trapped within the four walls of the Gas Board office or another like it, a lifetime of dead-end jobs stretching before him, Sheldrake's good eye saw the answer. To avoid his fate, he needed to make a leap of faith, to trust his instincts and write a fresh ending for himself. He wrote his next dialogue; again, just two magic words.

'I quit.'

In later interviews, he would rewrite causality so that he quit before he received Edith's news. To paint himself in a less reckless light, or because he thought it would make for a more dramatic story.

The next few months were a blur of activity, enough rejection letters to paper the nursery, single illustrations sold to music papers, a three panel funny animal strip for the local free paper, and a number of back-up stories for the licenced comic based on the Mister E television series. One of those early six page stories, not even featuring the main character, explored Mister E's home planet, plunged into war with a terrorist organisation from their future – the Black Sun Brigade. The motivation for attacking the Temperons? Atrocities they hadn't yet committed. Their mantra – if you're fighting a Time War, get your retaliation in first. Later, when asked where he got the idea from, Sheldrake had no recollection of writing it.

'It were just one story out of dozens. For every ten ideas I pitched, they'd buy one or two. I'd got meself some regular gigs with anyone who'd have me in them days. Twenty quid here, and a fiver here and there. I'd come to the conclusion I wasn't ever gonna be fast enough to both write and draw and still make a living. I had to choose.

Then, Spitfire Comics started taking short twist-ending science fiction stories from me. Wrote so many, I started dreaming in five page instalments.' – Jim Sheldrake (interviewed in 1990)

Sheldrake's dreams, as he described them, were actually his first fumbling steps into another world; a world of mind that he would come to call IdeaSpace.

1978

Having failed to get into art school, Barrow saw his future stretching away on the dole like many of his schoolmates. Then, out of the blue, he received a gift from his estranged father. It was a second-hand typewriter. As he lifted off the cover for the first time, a note fell out.

In his father's hand, it said *'Son – The world is waiting to hear from you'*.

Inspired by the multiversal hero of the Psience Friction novels of Jerry Johnson, the precocious 17 year old Barrow wrote and drew his own version. He submitted them for publication in Purple Daze, an indy comic sold mainly in head shops, alongside the Rizlas and bongs. It sold. Buoyed up on this early success, he approached a local newspaper and sold them an ongoing strip cartoon series about the misadventures of an unemployed Glaswegian superhero – Captain Coatbridge.

'Aye, Cap'n Cootbredge. Just a wee strip about a weegie dole-boy wi' superpowers. It wisnae gonna win any awards, but had its moments, ye ken?' – Gideon Barrow (interviewed in 1985)

1979

Another birthday, and another unexpected gift came Barrow's way. One of his odder uncles bought him a deck of tarot cards, and encouraged him to investigate the esoteric. His mother did not approve, but Barrow thought that was probably the point of the gift.

'Ah wis doin' awright wi' the comics, but after a year or so, ah found maself getting' a bit bored. An' ah wis eighteen by now, an' figured ah'd have more of a chance wi' the lassies in a band, ken? <laughs> So, ah put ma toys away an' reinvented maself as someone who wisnae a shy teetotal virgin. Figured ah'd be the songwriter, mebbe the bass player so ah could stand outside the spotlight, an girls would find me enigmatic <laughs again> Aye, the naïveté o' youth…' – Gideon Barrow (interviewed in 1985)

1982

The phone rang. Sheldrake answered. It was Del Rictus, one of Sheldrake's former editors back in the Mister E days. Sheldrake cut him off as soon as he recognised

the Yorkshire accent.

‘I don’t wanna work for Amazing Comics any more. Did you know they fired Dave?’

‘Jim, I’m not with Amazing any more. I’ve set up on my tod.’

Allowed to get a word in, he said he was looking to poach some of the best creators he’d worked with from his former paymasters.

‘I dunno, Del. I’ve got a lot on at the minute.’

‘Hear me out, Jim. Did I hear right that you were a fan of *The Man*? Bill Anglowitz’s old series from the fifties?’ He paused for a moment before going on, ‘Only I’ve just bought the rights to bring it back. If you’re interested?’

Sheldrake pondered. Wheels began to turn.

The first issue of Atom Comics hit the newsstand, with Sheldrake’s reinvention of The Man as the lead strip. Not only that, but the debut of another Sheldrake series, a dystopian future haunted by a masked vigilante known as *The Secret*.

Critical acclaim, if not huge sales, started to build. Awards soon followed in their wake, chief among them the Kestrel Award. A smaller pool to draw from than the American awards, Sheldrake would later joke that fans had flocked to vote for him in their dozens. Atom Comics duly plastered its covers with banners proclaiming ‘Winner of 7 Kestrel Awards’ and the like.

To those in the know, it may have appeared to be a joke, but to other eyes, across the pond, it gave a very different impression.

1983

In the New York headquarters of Gumshoe Periodicals, Senior Editor Leonard Holland was looking for a new writer to take over one of his titles – *Muck Monster*. A tickle in the back of his head told him that Jim Sheldrake might be a good fit. From somewhere, he managed to get hold of Sheldrake’s phone number and made the international call.

After Sheldrake hung up on him twice, Holland realised it wasn’t just a line fault disconnecting the call, but something convinced him to give it one last go. He persuaded Sheldrake of his intentions, and so began a four year association, taking the simple premise of a swamp-dwelling man-monster, and turning it on its head, as he had with *The Man*.

Awards began to proliferate, as did the acclaim of his peers and his readers. Bookcases were reorganised to make room for the baubles and the growing stack of Sheldrake’s published works.

In the trenches of the Scottish indie music scene, where pop stardom, hedonism and girls continued to elude his grasp, Gideon Barrow's eyes were lifted from his shoe-gazing, and he sensed an interesting movement in the comics, scene beckoning to him. A kindred spirit.

Barrow dropped the mic.

1984

After an escalating series of disagreements with Del Rictus, Sheldrake withdrew his labour from Atom Comics, leaving *The Man* and *The Secret* strips on the precipice of dual cliffhangers that would torment readers for years.

The vacuum left in his wake left an enticing opening for the prodigal son, Barrow. One door closed as another opened a crack. After accepting a couple of short strips, Rictus invited Barrow to pitch for the vacant slot writing *The Man*. Barrow nearly bit his hand off, but as an admirer of Sheldrake's work before him, felt he should write to him for permission.

'Anyroad, Del Rictus wouldnae give me Jim's address, so ah had tae do some diggin'. Ah thought it'd be just a formality, kiss the ring and get a blessin', y'ken? 'Hullo, ah've been asked to take over writin' *The Man*, but just wanted to make sure ye're okay wi' that.'

Ah didnae expect the letter ah got by return post. Real <unintelligible> stuff. Freaked me the fuck out! The message was pretty fuckin' clear. Back off. So, ah thanked Del for the offer, but cheerie-bye.' – Gideon Barrow (interviewed in 2009)

1985

Barrow again followed in Sheldrake's footprints, this time at Spitfire Comics; after a handful of short stories, he was quickly rewarded with his first major series: *Apex*.

Spitfire was very much a science fiction comic, and Barrow was writing about superheroes; the most American of genres. Initial reaction was mixed to say the least. Blending the unearthly creatures from Robert Harrison Blake's Feaster Mythos with his interest in chaos magic and Nazi Germany, with a lead character that was part Morrissey and part Bros, Barrow fused his dual lives in music and comics into a zeitgeist-riding hit.

1986

With Sheldrake pushing the *Muck Monster* onto greater and greater heights, pretty much dominating the awards on two continents, the editors at Gumshoe Periodicals were fighting each other to work with him. They'd just bought up an entire line of superheroes from a defunct smaller publisher, and dangled that carrot in front of Sheldrake, in hopes of catching lightning in a bottle the way that he'd done with *The Man* and *Muck Monster* before.

With less nostalgic attachment to the characters, Sheldrake was initially sceptical, but the editors persevered, offering him a free hand to reinvent the characters however he saw fit. Cogs began to turn in Sheldrake's mindspace, and he found an approach to the material that got his juices flowing.

He enlisted fellow Brit Steve Mandrill to join the project, an artist who could cope with the insane level of detail he had in mind. It would be the most heavily structured comic they'd ever worked on, a deconstruction of the superhero genre and a serious investigation of the mental state of those who chose to dress up in spandex to fight crime.

As they drew their plans together, and Gumshoe began to get an inkling just how far from their origins the project was wandering, the bean counters reminded Editorial how much they had paid for the rights to these characters. Their worry was that the crazy Brit would leave their new acquisitions unusable by the end of his story, and Gumshoe seriously out of pocket. And yet, they were intrigued by Sheldrake's plans.

After a few transatlantic phone calls, a compromise was reached that suited both parties. Instead of having to ask Sheldrake to apply the brakes and get back to the roadmap, he could just change the names. Better yet, Sheldrake and Mandrill would own a stake in the characters. Gumshoe reserved the publication rights, and planned to put out a collected edition – one of their first – but once that went out of print, the rights would revert to the creators to do with as they wished.

Bolstered by the new terms of their contract, Sheldrake and Mandrill poured themselves onto the page. By the end of the year, issue one of *TickTockMen* hit the stands. Initial sales were encouraging, and Gumshoe filled their other titles with house ads promoting the maxi-series of the year.

'Who knows what time it is? *The TickTockMen*.' (from in-house advertising, Gumshoe Periodicals 1986-87)

Even before its conclusion, *TickTockMen* began to attract awards. Some of them outside the comics ghetto. Heads began to turn toward Sheldrake.

1987

The immediate success of *TickTockMen* led to a promotional tour, both of the United States and closer to home. Sheldrake insisted on a Hampton appearance, but also made stops from Glasgow all the way down as far as Brighton.

The Glasgow event was hosted by Four Colour Comics, with a talk and signing in the shop during the day, and a social gathering at owner Iain Fraser's favourite watering hole and a curry to finish off. The favoured few who were invited to dine included one of Fraser's regular customers, by the name of Gideon Barrow. As a big fan of Sheldrake's work, Fraser thought they'd be kindred spirits.

The meal went without a hiccup. Naan bread was broken and the conversation was lubricated by wine and ale. A night where memories were made, though remembered differently depending on who you asked. Sheldrake recounted much later.

'If I have it right, I was up in Glasgow for a signing or some-such,' Sheldrake recounted much later, 'and they asked if I minded them inviting along an aspiring young writer who was a big fan of my stuff, and I said sure. This was Gideon Barrow. Back when he had hair. As far as I can recall, this was the only time I actually met him to speak to. Quiet lad, very complimentary, told me I'd inspired him to be a comics writer. I wished him luck and said I'd keep an eye out for his work. When his name started popping up in Spitfire, I could see he was doing a bit of a tribute act, but figured he'd grow out of it.'

Barrow's own account differed somewhat.

'Excuse me? 'Aspiring writer' is it? Ah'd been gettin' stories published as far back as 1978, writin' an' drawin' Cap'n Cootbredge for three papers. Ah'd even bin on panels at comic conventions. Whit had Jim Sheldrake done by then? One illustration sold t' Melody Maker. Ah'd never heard o' him till 1982, while ah'd bin a professional for five years. Give it a Google if ye don't believe me.'

A few weeks after the disputed meal, Barrow received a request for an interview for a Glasgow based comics fanzine.

Very much the adoring fan, eighteen year old Bobbie Buchanan confided his ambitions to be a writer/artist to Barrow during the Q and A. Barrow saw something of himself in Buchanan and much as Sheldrake had done to him, he wished him luck, and told him to keep in touch.

Buchanan recalled one more thing about the interview, and considered it the best piece of advice he'd ever received.

‘Choose one. Ye’ve no got the chops t’dae it aw. Put aw your effort into your art an’ ye’ll mebbe make a crackin’ artist. Or really work at your writin’, till it shines. Ah tried doin’ both ma’self, an’ ah wisnae quick enough tae make any money.’

Looking for things to sell, to help make ends meet, Barrow turned his flat upside down. The cardboard box for things to sell remained depressingly empty as Barrow considered possession after possession, and decided to keep them all.

In the bottom of his wardrobe, he uncovered Uncle Billy’s birthday gift. The tarot deck. While Barrow had not thought of it for some time, he still followed the rules. He kept the cards wrapped in silk. Always treat your tools with respect, Billy had told him.

There was a thump on the doormat.

Investigating, Barrow found a package waiting for him. Strange, he thought. He was not expecting anything.

Tearing the top from the envelope, it was a book. *Liber Nyx*. There was no author listed. Flipping through it, Barrow saw it was decorated with occult pictograms, sigils and ritual maps. The words chaos magic popped out at him from many of the pages.

The book naturally fell open onto the chapter on sigil magic.

Only one person would have sent him such a gift. Good old mad old Billy. And it was entirely appropriate that it would arrive just as Barrow was thinking about him. Uncle Billy loved to ride the synchronicity wave. Barrow sat down to read. And made notes. And then his first sigil.

The book wasn’t from Billy.

In the *Saturday Jungle* studio set, designed to look like a treehouse, presenter Jez Splatt and his puppet sidekick Sssssid were interviewing British comics writer Jim Sheldrake, who was dressed in a vivid red suit, black shirt with a skinny white leather tie.

‘Welcome to the Jungle, Jim!’ Jez did his traditional guest greeting, a quick solo on the bongos.

‘Ullo, Jez! Ow’s it going, Sssssid?’

‘Sssssimply sssssuper, Jim.’ Sssssid’s head swayed back and forth.

‘So, you’re British, but you make comics for the biggest company in America, right? How did you end up doing that?’

‘Well, the Americans came over in a big Chevrolet and asked if I wanted to be a big star, and I said all right. They’d got an old character whose comic wasn’t doing so well, and wanted me to revamp it for them. Bring it more into the

twentieth century. Make it a bit more relevant. Less silly. The Muck Monster started out as a scientist who got injected by mad science chemicals and fell in a swamp, turning him into a plant. My take on it was to give it a little tweak. My *Muck Monster* wasn't a man at all, but a plant with delusions of grandeur. Yeah, I admit it. It's still silly, but a bit less silly than before. I've done me research. I read *New Scientist*, and all that.'

'So, do you put the words in the bubbles?'

'Something like that, Jez. Here's one of me scripts.' Sheldrake handed over a thick stack of pages.

'Ooh, that's a lot of words, innit, Sssssid!'

'Sssssertainly isssss, Jez!'

'Never use one word when ten will do the job, that's what I say!' Sheldrake laughed as he fluffed out his long hair over his shoulders.

'You write a story and send it all the way to America, and an artist draws it out, right?' Jez held up a card mock-up of a page of black and white comic art for the audience to see.

'That's right. One artist pencils the pages, then gives it to another one who does the inks.'

'Then it's my favourite bit, someone colours it in.' Jez rummaged through the stack of paper strewn over the table and holds up a coloured version of the previous page.

'Mine's the bit where after I've spent a month writing a story, to see the finished comic come out, and thinking, I did that. Before me, it's a blank piece of paper. I tell the artist what to draw, and together it comes to life on the page.' (Excerpt - Jim Sheldrake interview segment, *Saturday Jungle* 18th July 1987)

Suffering the aftermath of a night on the tiles, Michelle Montague awoke in an unfamiliar house. Blinking away the momentary panic, she remembered where she was. She'd taken up the offer of going home with a university friend for the holidays, staying at her parents' house.

She heard the muffled sound of the television coming from downstairs. Her mouth felt furry from the witch's brew concoction of wine and shots the night before, so she braved the daylight in search of a glass of water.

Her friend's young sister, Nicola, was watching Saturday morning television, while shovelling Sugar Puffs into her mouth. The programme, like most Saturday shows, was too loud, too fast and too bright. Even so, as Montague sipped at her water, she found herself drawn into it, and plopped herself down on the sofa beside the girl.

‘You make comics for the biggest company in America, right?’ the host asked his loudly dressed celebrity guest, ‘How did you end up doing that?’

Montague did not recognise the guest, but his wild mane of hair, luxurious beard and hypnotic eyes marked him out from the usual pop stars she saw on TV.

Nicola put her empty cereal bowl down and nudged her.

‘Is he a wizard?’

Montague was about to dismiss the idea, but as she looked at the screen, seeing him gesticulate and flick at his hair, something popped into her head, and she found herself saying something else.

‘Not just any old wizard,’ she said, ‘He’s a Grand Warlock, and he’s the headmaster at the school where all the other wizards learn about magic.’

Nicola sat transfixed as Montague continued to spin a story from whole cloth.

She barely paused, as though she was merely remembering the story rather than making it up. A name flashed into her mind. And she would always associate that name with that face.

‘His name is Standish Lopsiday.’

‘But Jez just called him Jim Sheldrake,’ Nicola said.

‘Ah,’ Montague said, ‘that’s his normal name. They don’t use their wizard names around the Spellblind. A wizard’s true name can give you power over them.’

‘How do you know his wizard name?’

‘My tortoise told me,’ Montague said, as though that explained everything.

Nicola seemed to accept it.

At that point, Nicola’s older sister shuffled into the room, having finally surfaced.

‘I thought I heard you two gabbling on. I’m surprised you aren’t still hiding under the duvet after the amount you put away last night!’

‘I was a bit delicate to start with, but I’m surprisingly okay now. Think I dodged a bullet there.’

‘Lucky you,’ Simone replied, still squinting from the sunlight. ‘I think I took that bullet for you.’

‘Simi! Look at the telly,’ Nicola pointed at Sheldrake, ‘That man’s really a wizard. And a headmaster. Michelle said. I want to go to that school next year.’

Simone raised an eyebrow.

‘Have you been filling my sister’s head with stories?’ She smiled.

‘That’s what heads are for, aren’t they?’

1989

The second wave of the British Comics Invasion scooped up Gideon Barrow in its net. He embraced the challenge with gusto, churning out pitches for several series based on dormant Gumshoe properties. In the year of *Knight Errant*, a big budget movie adaptation of one of Gumshoe's biggest properties, it was Barrow's graphic novel starring Knight Errant's nemesis that blew the doors off. *Madhouse: Mister Grin is a Very Naughty Boy* was a fully painted psychological portrait of Knight Errant's rogues gallery. Its success caught everyone by surprise, not least its creators.

'Ah'd no been workin' for Gumshoe for more than five minutes when they bought Madhoose. Ah thought they'd never gie me a go on *Knight Errant*, so ah threw all mah ideas intae the pitch. Gie aw them old villains a lick o' paint. Got lucky tae have Malkie McDonald as mah artist. When the pages started t' come through, you could see it wis a sheer f'kin' class act. Ah figured we'd sell a few off the back o' the fillum, and more as a paperback. When the sales figures came back, mah editor gave me a bell. Ah remember him askin' if ah wis sittin' down. Ye're gonnae be rich, he said. Believe it when ah see it, ah said. Then ah got mah first royalty cheque.'

Coinciding with his newfound celebrity in America, Barrow accepted an invitation to write a regular column for indy comics magazine BiffBamPow! *Kicking over the Statues* provided a venue for Barrow's mischievous side, where he would poke fun at the comics' scene, share industry scuttlebutt and prick the pomposity of the leading lights. Occasional mentions of Barrow's new best pal Bobbie Buchanan would pop up as he took his first steps in comics.

As the highest profile British creator, Sheldrake was a frequent target.

'I didn't read any of the columns meself, but I was made aware of them. As far as I can tell, Barrow decided to build his reputation by trashing mine. It's one way of doing it I suppose, but not one that would particularly endear him to me. So I decided that I'd stop paying attention. Stop reading anything he had to say. And that's been, by and large, reasonably successful for me.' (Jim Sheldrake interview, 2000)

Behind the scenes, strings were pulled and fires stoked. A nip here and a tuck there. Each reported slight by one man of the other drew Sheldrake and Barrow into an escalating conflict of call and response, whether they knew it or not.

Micro-publisher Neptune Comics opened their doors for business, launching their comics' imprint with *Son of God*, written by newcomer Bobbie Buchanan. He based his protagonist, a superhero that's actually the Antichrist, on TV celebrity star and comic book fan, Simon Rose.

It was good for a few column inches, and gave Buchanan two tools he would build his career upon. Celebrity and spectacle.

1990

After a marathon thirty-six hour writing session chasing a deadline, Barrow collapsed from exhaustion. When he came back to himself the next day, he found a finished script. It tied together all the threads from the long-running storyline he had been working towards, but he had no recollection of any of the writing.

More alarming still, he found he has written himself into the story. Not so much breaking the fourth wall as being completely oblivious to it, Gideon Barrow appeared to his creation *Animus*, revealing his fictional status, and gave a heartfelt apology for all the horrendous things he had done to him in order to entertain the readers.

Barrow pulled out his file copies of the earlier issues of *Animus*, and saw a mysterious figure lurking in the background of scenes throughout, pulling the strings inexorably towards the deus ex machina. He recognised himself, even down to his choice of clothing, but he had no memory of having directed the artist to draw it. He checked against the scripts, and the instructions were all there in black and white.

After the panic attack, Barrow stuffed the script into an envelope and consigned it to the postal service.

He crossed his fingers. When he received no more than a raised eyebrow from his editor in response to the off-piste nature of his script, Barrow breathed a sigh of relief. He felt he had gotten away with something.

While travelling down to London from Manchester, Montague's train encountered a four hour delay. Stuck between stations while they awaited assistance for a mechanical breakdown, she passed the time mulling over ideas for a story. They bubbled up unbidden, and she was distraught to find herself without a working pen.

By chance, the couple sitting opposite her in the carriage had a spare biro and legal pad they were only too glad to let her use. Grateful, she started to scribble. By the time the train repairs were finished and they managed to limp into the nearest station, where replacement buses had been laid on, Montague noticed her

Good Samaritans had departed. But by then, she had a new travelling companion. *Finn Foster – Boy Warlock*.

As she was about to board the bus, she stopped to let the other passengers off, and was taken aback to see a cat jump down onto the kerb, followed by a red-headed boy in school uniform. Taking her seat, she dug out the hasty notes she had just written that described her new protagonist, and found a perfect match for the boy and his cat. She took it as a good sign.

Much as he had reinvented himself as a rock musician and the bad boy of comics, Barrow felt the need to go further. He didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't take drugs stronger than paracetamol. Despite the wild personality he projected, he was the dictionary definition of straight edge.

He dumped his long-time girlfriend, defied the onset of male pattern baldness by shaving his head, and bought a lot of plane tickets using some of his new wealth.

For someone who had more than dabbled with chaos magic, Barrow took an ordered scientific approach to his first experiments with alcohol and other substances.

'Ah'd never had so much as a shandy up to then, yeah? Aw the reaction ah'd had for mah work, the success. Made me start to take things more seriously. Tae me, bein' a writer wis like bein' Hunter Thompson. William Burroughs. Aw thae pissheids an' junkies. Got me wonderin' what ah'd be like if ah did like them. Ah decided tae strip away aw the stuff I wis, an' see what wis left. So, ah said ah'd line up a row o' different kinds o' booze and write down what they'd do ta me. One night, ah'd drink a pint o' beer and note down how ah felt. Next night, ah'd have a pint o' wine. See what it did to mah writin'. The same wi' vodka, spliffs an' pills. It was a rare ol' time, let me tell ye. No that ah'm advocating that approach for everyone. Drugs're bad, kids!' (Gideon Barrow interview, 2006)

1992

In Hampton, the air was acrid with the smell of bridges burning. The terms of the 1986 contract between Sheldrake, Mandrill and Gumshoe Periodicals for the publication of *TickTockMen* was clear. The series would remain Gumshoe's property for as long as it remained in print, after which all rights would revert to the creators. At the time, the earliest infancy of the graphic novel market, nothing stayed in print. No one predicted how well the book would sell.

Never fond of corporations, Sheldrake was becoming entirely allergic to their

presence in his life. He justified the acceptance of royalty cheques for his work for hire projects as the least they could do, and knew that if they could engineer a way to do less, they surely would. Likewise, when movie producers came sniffing around, he raised no objection to what he considered free money.

‘People sometimes ask me where my principles sit with them trying to buy the rights to make movies out of my old work. Do I think they’re ruining my books? Well, I look at it like this. If they wanna throw a few bucks in my direction for a movie they ain’t ever going to make, they can afford it. And do I think they’re ruining my books? Look. <points at bookcase containing collections of every series Sheldrake has in book form> There they are, safe and sound.’ (Jim Sheldrake interview, 1995)

Fans at the editorial level and the readership were disappointed when he walked out, but senior management collectively shrugged and continued to squeeze every cent they could from Sheldrake’s works in their possession. Gumshoe management would do everything in their power to protect profits, even if it killed the goose that laid the golden eggs. If it could be reprinted, licenced, stuck on an action figure or a tee-shirt, it was.

Sheldrake’s response was to employ those two magic words he had used to great effect in the past, and he vowed never to work for Gumshoe again.

Living in Portugal, teaching English as a Foreign Language, Montague met and fell hard for a journalist, marrying him the same year. Ricardo do Nascimento, Ricky to his friends and lovers, also worked with words, but his journalistic training left him a hardwired suspicion of fiction and its practitioners. The only source of friction between them in the early days, Montague resolved to keep her literary ambitions locked away from him, in a drawer and in her heart, until she was ready to share them.

Their relationship was turbulent from the beginning; the candle that burned brightest. The marriage had been a mistake. To her cool British upbringing, Ricky had been fire, and she wanted to be warmed by that fire, without considering that if she strayed too close, she risked being burned.

Nascimento descended into ever more frequent alcoholic jags, using his irregular working hours to mask the one night stands he thought Montague was unaware of.

Then, cutbacks at his newspaper led to Nascimento being laid off. Montague found herself pregnant.

Nascimento claimed to have been emasculated by having to rely on his wife as the sole breadwinner, and his frustration spilled over into violence. Montague felt her husband lose dimensions day by day. He had begun as a bit part player in her life, and grew towards a co-starring role in her romance. But now, he was slipping into stereotypical villainy. Less real than one of her characters. Finn Foster had more depth.

Montague retreated into her fiction, but lacked the confidence to show it to anyone else. Nascimento had driven away most of her friends, leaving her trapped without support. With the baby coming, she could no longer take solace in a bottle.

She decided she must write her way out.

Spitfire Comics invited Barrow to reinvent the iconic British 1950's science fiction hero *Lex Christian: Space Chaplain* as a satirical anti-Thatcher political comic called *Lex*. Guaranteed to generate newspaper headlines and the froth of Daily Mail readers, Barrow agreed.

He succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. It all helped to fuel Barrow's growing reputation as the dangerous bad boy of comics. But still, he wanted more. More than anything, he wanted his stories to *move*.

'Ye wantae get the universe tae do whit ye want? There's no big secret. This shite works, y'ken? Just write down your intent, as clearly as ye can. Ye wantae have a big movie, an' why'd wouldnae ye? Just write somethin' like 'it is mah desire tae have a hit movie made from one o' mah stories'. Then ye cross out aw the repeatin' letters. Get rid o' the vowels an' aw. Whit ye have left, ye use tae make a magic shape. Somethin' that disnae look like words any more. Get your room quiet, dim the lights so ye're no distracted. Focus on your sigil an' think about whit ye're after. Ye need tae charge it up first. It needs tae be somethin' that gets the blood up, a bit o' excitement. Ah charged one wi' a bungee jump the one time. A good ol'-fashioned shag'd dae it, or a hand shandy if ye have tae. Wan it's charged, ye can launch it any old time. An' then… ye have tae forget aw about it. An' in mah experience, slowly, the universe falls over itself tae make it happen.'

1993

On his 40th birthday, rather than have a mid-life crisis, Sheldrake gathered his nearest and dearest together and declared himself to be a ceremonial magician. This surprised nobody in Hampton, where they had assumed he had a broomstick kicking around in his shed for years.

When pressed for an explanation in interviews, he blamed it on a sentence he had used in one of his comics.

'I'd put somethink along the lines of 'the only place where gods inarguably exist is in the human mind' and realised that, bugger me, I'd accidentally written some sort of True Statement, and the only thing left to do was rearrange my life around it.'

One argument too many. The camel's back was broken, and so was the marriage. Montague found herself thrown out onto the street. With help from the Portuguese police, she fled the country with her daughter. She headed for Edinburgh, to be near her sister, Donna.

Aside from her baby, the only thing of any value she took with her was three chapters of Finn Foster. There was nothing else from her time in Portugal she wanted to keep.

1994

As the next stage of his evolution as a magician, on January 7th, Sheldrake performed a ritual to contact an entity which might serve as his personal deity. At the culmination of the ritual, Sheldrake made contact with a presence that identified itself as Glycon. Originating in 2nd century Rome, Glycon was the figurehead of a cult founded by Alexander of Abonoteichus.

When asked to describe his new patron, Sheldrake described it as a being that sounded very like the *Saturday Jungle* puppet character he had encountered in 1987, Sssssid.

'The prophet Lucien reckoned that the whole Glycon cult was a big old fraud, and poor old Glycon was actually just a glove puppet. And that's fair enough. I've no reason to disbelieve him. In fact, it's perfect. If I'm gonna have a god, I'd prefer it to be an obvious hoax. That way I'm unlikely to start believing that a glove puppet created the universe or anything dangerous like that.' (Jim Sheldrake interview, 2003)

1994

Still as thick as thieves, Barrow introduced his friend Buchanan to his American editors. Within months, Buchanan was commissioned to become the next writer of *Muck Monster*, following in the footsteps of Sheldrake. Barrow agreed to co-write the first story arc in order to ease him in. Buchanan had pitched several times on his own, but Gumshoe had proven reluctant to work with him until

Barrow's intervention on his behalf. Terms of the arrangement were not made public at the time, but it would later be revealed that as well as co-writing the first few issues, Barrow had agreed to plot out the rest of the series and act as an uncredited editor/mentor to the fledgling writer.

Sales increased, and critical reception was good, but continual comparisons with Sheldrake's landmark run on the title took the shine off for him.

'What can I say about Jim Sheldrake? He casts a big bloody shadow!' (Bobbie Buchanan interview, 1994)

As time went on, what had begun as a genuine gesture of solidarity, helping a friend to get a foot on the ladder, led to the first signs of discord between the pair. Barrow decided to change his life again. He bought a plane ticket to Kathmandu in the hope that absence would make the heart grow fonder. It was not far enough.

'Aw ah can say is, from the moment we started writin' together, the division o' labour wis a bit lopsided, y'ken what ah'm sayin'? An' it never really changed. Ye get tae a point where ye wonder if ye're being taken for a mug.' (Gideon Barrow interview 2009)

1995
Kathmandu. The inciting incident that would inform the next stage in Barrow's evolution.

'Ah had… well, let's no' beat about the bush. Ah call it mah alien abduction experience. Ah wis abducted by aliens in Kathmandu, 'cause that's why ah went there. Thae fuckers wearin' bone masks n' dark robes showed up an' took me away wi' the fairies. None o' your anal probes, don't ye worry! They told me secrets o' the universe, aw' that shite. Oh aye, ah know most o' yis think it wis aw hallucination or druggie bullshit, but ah couldnae gi' a shit. Believe whit ye like. Anyone can do it if they wantae. In fact, ah highly recommend it! Whatever went down, ah've been unpackin' whit happened in mah work for years. *Karma Knights* grew outta that. Mah first go at getting' mah head round it all.' (Gideon Barrow interview, 2009)

While still processing the after-effects of his Kathmandu experience, Barrow channelled everything into his next series for Gumshoe: *Karma Knights*' premise

was a sci-fi action comic about terrorist heroes fighting against occult Illuminati-like organisations and secret societies running the world. Barrow envisaged it running for at least fifty issues and that it would be his magnum opus.

No longer content just to write himself into his comics, Barrow modelled the lead protagonist Imperious Rex as an idealised version of himself. His relationship with former best friend Bobbie Buchanan had grown toxic, and his current girlfriend was unable to understand where his head was at. He left her and started to explore the S&M scene. He already had the shaved head, but added rubber fetishwear and long sweeping leather coats to his ensemble. And something he dubbed his fiction suit. Everything he did was calculated to blur the lines between fiction and reality.

It was what the aliens had told him to do.

1996

Her disastrous marriage dissolved, and Nascimento expressing no interest in maintaining ties with their child, Montague wrote him out of their life, as though he had never been. Her new identity was that of a single mother in Edinburgh, forced to navigate the choppy waters of benefit system bureaucracy. Despite the daily hardships, it was still preferable to her old life in Portugal. Montague had to choose between heating her flat for the day or feeding herself and her young daughter.

When not being a full-time mother, part-time writer, and jumping through hoops for the Benefits Agency, Montague was working her way through the agent listings in the Writers and Artists Yearbook at the library and receiving a series of form rejections one after the next. From those agencies that replied at all.

The black dog circled her, looking for a chink in her armour. To give herself a measure of control, she wrote the dog into her novel as the Sappers, something Finn Foster could beat.

On Monday morning, Goodman strolled into office later than usual. He carried a flat white coffee for himself and latte for his assistant, and a Guardian under his arm. He held out the latte as he looked up, and did a double-take.

‘Where’s Mary?’ he asked the stranger sat behind her desk.

‘Family emergency,’ the stranger replied, ‘I’m from the agency.’

‘Hope you’re a fast reader. Latte?’

She declined the coffee, but picked up the manuscript on top of the teetering slush pile dominating her desk.

‘Let me know if you find anything halfway decent among the slush. I’ll be on a

conference call for the next couple of hours. Welcome aboard!'

As he closed the door to his private office behind him, Goodman realised he could not recall the name of the temp, though he was positive he had asked her.

By Wednesday, Goodman had forgotten her name again, despite asking several times. She was almost as good as Mary, and had put a dent in the stack of unsolicited manuscripts, filled with the hopes of wannabe authors. One possible out of twelve submissions. Not a bad hit rate, and less chance of a health and safety compensation case if the slush pile fell over and crushed the new girl.

'This one,' she said, thrusting one of the many manuscripts in front of him, just as he was hoping to get away early. A night out with the boys beckoned, but her earnestness intrigued him. He put his bag down and took a quick skim. Not written in green biro at least.

'*Finn Foster and the Diamond Gondola*?' he said. 'We don't take children's authors here.'

'You should read it anyway.'

'There's no money in the children's market.' He could see she was not going to back down, so with a sigh, he unzipped his bag and stuffed it inside.

'I'll give it a chapter, okay?'

'Two.'

'Alright, two.'

He had read five before he got around to texting the boys to reschedule their drinking session.

'Miss Montague? Sorry for calling so late. My name's Philip Goodman. You sent your book to my agency. I've just finished it and wanted to offer to represent you.'

The temp did not come in to work again. Goodman was too busy with Finn Foster to seek out a number for the agency. He did not even know which agency had supplied her, but fortunately, Mary was back at her desk after the weekend, as though nothing had happened.

Danby's would change ownership and names several times in the years to come. Twelve years hence, a plaque would be affixed to the frontage of the café, incorrectly proclaiming it as the birthplace of Finn Foster. Pilgrims paid inflated prices in order to sit at the same table – not the actual same table, of course – as Montague, as though it brought them closer to their idol, or brought them luck.

Several times each year, visitors to the buildings across the way from Danby's would claim to glance over the road to see a young woman with pram in tow, sat in the window, scribbling into a notepad; lost in another world and time. Some

swore that the Danby's sign hung above the window, only to flicker back to whatever upmarket bistro currently held the lease when they looked again.

Truth or fanciful fiction on the part of susceptible enthusiasts, aided and abetted by a hungry press? A little from column A, and a little from column B. Legend would later tell how she would spend her days writing the novel that would make her a multi-millionaire while sitting in the window of Danby's Café, nursing a single cup of tea all day, unable to afford a second. The legend would not often mention that the café was owned by her brother-in-law.

When the legend becomes fact, print the legend. But does the inverse also hold true? When you print the legend, does the legend become fact?

1997

Legend tells that *Finn Foster and the Diamond Gondola* was rejected by no less than twelve publishers before Goodman found one prepared to gamble on it. Very little fanfare accompanied the launch, but a series of library visits helped to build word of mouth. The book passed between hands in playgrounds all over the country. Real magic – publicity that could not be bought.

On the book's cover Michelle Montague had been newly rechristened ML Montague by her publisher so as not to scare off notoriously fickle boy readers who would wrinkle their noses at the thought of reading a book by a girl.

As the momentum built, Philip Goodman prepared to auction the foreign publication rights. Industry scuttlebutt fanned the flames into a bidding war, pushing the price up. As each territory came up, everyone wanted to hitch their wagon to the Finn Foster phenomenon. The dominoes kept falling.

Depression became less of a constant companion, but when the black dog came sniffing around, Montague introduced a personification in her latest book, hoping that she could do something for other sufferers, to show that it could be beaten. Her old monsters, Sappers; the villainous wraiths she called Negs, and school bully Shudders, all represented aspects of her illness. Finn Foster's best friend Gillian Griffin in particular had a lot of scenes involving the Negs.

In interviews, Montague admitted that Griffin was something of a Mary Sue, based on her when she was at school. A bit of a know-it-all.

1998

The American mainstream came knocking on Jim Sheldrake's door again. The only reason he did not shut the door in their face was that they were at his actual door.

Billy Nguyen, legendary superhero artist and publisher at Thunderhead Comics,

had come to Hampton with a proposition.

'If I'd called, you'd have hung up on me. Am I right?' Nguyen smiled his perfect smile.

'Nothink personal, Billy, but yeah. Probably.'

'Then that's why I'm here. I want you to listen. Give me an hour to lay it all out for you. If at the end of the hour, if you want to shut that door on me, I'll even open it myself, go into town and have one of those godawful things you have over here that you call pizza, and get back on my jet. No hard feelings. Deal?'

'Go on then. I'll stick the kettle on.'

By the second mugful, Sheldrake was on board. Thunderhead were an independent company, not affiliated with any of the companies Sheldrake had turned his back on. Some of their editors were old friends he had enjoyed working with. Nguyen did not want just one comic from Sheldrake, but a whole line. He would curate the range, and if he wanted to pull in friends to work on the books, that was fine and dandy with Nguyen.

Since he had come out as a magician and seriously cut back on his comics work, he had no outlet for many of the ideas that fizzed constantly. His immediate thought for a unifying theme for the prospective series was to turn time back to a time before the superhero and take another path. His line would start with pulp adventures and project forward from there. He also had some projects already in the works that would slot right in, as long as creator-owned work could be part of the deal.

When the white heat of creation cooled, Sheldrake saw that night had fallen.

'I need to make a few calls, but I think we're on.'

'That's a relief! Let me buy you dinner?'

'Pizza?'

'Only if you want to sink our deal, buddy!'

1999

By the end of their first year, the imprint, which Sheldrake named *AmeriComics*, published its premier title; their first creator-owned book, *Imaginary Friends*. It was essentially a book where Sheldrake could draw on the greatest works of world literature and the most humble and obscure penny dreadful, and tie them into a single continuity. It gave him and his artist collaborator Steve O'Dowd free licence to play with all the best toys. The Bride of Frankenstein could cross paths with Abraham Van Helsing.

Before the first serial had concluded, Hollywood had enquired about buying an option. More free money for a film that would never be made, they thought, and

headed back into the word mines, researching the second volume, where every literary version of Venus would be unified as a way for the Sinister Gods to conceal a Great Secret, and then back in time for tea.

2000

The anticipated sequel, *Finn Foster and the Black Sun* was published. Sales broke records, and ML Montague was booked to appear on the chat show circuit. When they asked the inevitable question all authors face, she said that they grew on trees in the Greatwood. She had merely to pluck one when she had a need, and hold it up to her ear. Then she would write down what it whispered.

The villain of the latest book was rumoured by an old acquaintance to have been based on a former flatmate of Montague's during her time at university. He was notorious for passing off anecdotes of other people as his own, to appear more interesting.

When pressed on the subject, Montague would merely make a joke and politely change the subject.

An email hit Barrow's inbox from a nodding acquaintance he had met on tour in Australia. It made it to his private email account, rather than the public one, so he paid more attention to it.

Keep your peepers open for a new film in the next few months called Cyberia. I just got out of an advance crew screening as a friend of a friend. Hope they gave you some phat option money, because your fingerprints are all over it, man. This is Karma Knights – the Movie.

Barrow did some digging, and the more he uncovered, the less he liked it. There were eye witnesses claiming to see the director carrying copies of *Karma Knights* around on set while they were shooting. Themes, snatches of dialogue, even down to the costume designs. Barrow was gutted. Any chance of a Karma Knights movie had spiralled down the toilet.

Then it came back to him. The sigil. Years ago, he had created a sigil as part of a ritual to boost his career to the next level. He had wanted his stories to move.

He had forgotten it, as per the rules of magic. And it happened. Though, as with so many magical deals, the devil was in the detail.

It is my desire to have a hit movie made from one of my stories.

The desire was granted, though not as Barrow would have wished. And *Cyberia* was different enough to keep it from being legally actionable. Sometimes, certain forces noted, to change the names was to change the thing.

Parlaying his earlier work with Gideon Barrow into a high profile new project, Bobbie Buchanan was in the right place at the right time to put his stamp on hit superhero team book *The Management*. With its already dark spin on the traditional super-team, the series allowed him to play to his strengths. He took the playfulness of a Barrow script and then released the good taste handbrake.

If he did not manage to offend a tabloid newspaper at least once every couple of issues, he felt he was off his game. Gender issues, politician baiting, scatological humour. Where others feared to tread, he jumped right in without a second's hesitation. If he had an angel of his better nature on one shoulder and a devil on the other, the angel had long since been fucked to death by a nuclear dildo.

'I never met a tone I couldn't lower.' (Bobbie Buchanan interview, 2004)

2001

Studying the sales data for *Karma Knights*, Barrow was troubled. As the first volume got deeper into the mysteries he wanted to explore, the readership started to bail. At first, it could be explained by natural wastage, as people check out the first few issues of any new title and then wander away. As his most personal work to date, any lost readers brought a twinge of pain to him, but the numbers were hovering close to cancellation numbers.

He had not had the call yet. It was always a call, not an impersonal email. The call that told you one of two things. You're done, or wrap it up in x number of issues. Barrow had the profile to at least expect the second option, but even so, to curtail the story at this point, even if they gifted him an entire year – that would be unconscionable.

He intended the book to operate as a hypersigil, a magical working to encourage mankind to evolve to the next thing. Without the attention of enough minds, it would be stillborn.

Barrow started to worry that as he had deliberately made himself Imperious Rex and vice versa, what would happen to the version of him in the *real* world if Gumshoe cancelled the comic?

Desperate measures were called for. He had a loyal fanbase who followed him from book to book. By appealing to them, he might save the book and save himself. Another writer would have asked the readers to take a more active role, to spread the word to their friends and boost the readership. That never occurred to Barrow. Instead, he used the letters page for something more *hands-on*.

Readers were well aware of his claims to be a chaos magician, and took it at

face value, or just Barrow entertaining the audience. This time, he provided a blueprint – a kit to create a sigil to save the book and how to activate it. He was asking for an act of faith. Sigils, he said, could be charged in many ways. Anything emotionally stirring could do it, such as singing in a packed karaoke bar for the first time, taking a bungee jump. He provided the sigil to save *Karma Knights* and a date and time, so that every participant would launch the sigil simultaneously. He suggested that an appropriate form of charging would be an act of masturbation. The *Karma Knights* Wankathon, as it was known, if it worked, would guarantee that the series would reach its own happy finish.

That the Wankathon coincided with Barrow's reconfiguring of *Karma Knights* into a less obscure action-packed Bond movie storyline for its second volume, and the media coverage of the stunt may have been completely unconnected. What could not be denied was that Barrow's intent, to increase sales and save the book were achieved, however it happened.

The red carpet at the British premiere of *Finn Foster and the Diamond Gondola (Finn Foster and the Diamond Boat* in the USA) was where ML Montague chose to show off her new husband.

The box office was brisk and reviews outstanding.

The multi-media snake swallowed its tail. The buzz around the film and related merchandising fed into sales for the book and anticipation for the sequel, creating the 'Finn Foster Phenomenon', which inflated Montague's growing celebrity. It wouldn't be the first time a popular creation had gone supercritical. Perhaps the last had been back in 1963. Mutakfever: the meteoric rise of the part robotic, part mutant enemies of the Mysterious Mister E.

Book signings now had to be coordinated like a military operation. No rolling up to a half-empty public library and an audience surprised to find that Montague's initial did not stand for Mark or Michael.

That and the healthy percentage Montague earned from the film deal meant that by year's-end, she had risen from benefits claimant to multi-millionaire.

Taking advice, she started to plough much of her wealth into charitable organisations to help sufferers of Multiple Sclerosis, which stole her mother from her, help for single parents and children's charities across the world.

The capstone of her Annus Mirabilis came with a communique from the Palace. An officiary, in the most formal of terms had written to enquire whether Ms Montague would, if it were to be offered, be of a mind to accept the Queen's Honour of an OBE.

She readily accepted, and in a private ceremony, she received her first shackle from the establishment, marking her, they thought, as their chattel.

Sheldrake was alarmed to discover that the film adaptation of one of his books had made it into production.

Dear Boss was an account of the notorious Jack the Ripper case unlike any other. Where most versions played up the whodunit angle, Sheldrake had written a whydunit, using Jack as the protagonist, and attempting to holistically solve the case by understanding the culture in which it happened.

Hollywood cast beautiful people, and played it as a straightforward mystery.

Against his better judgement, Sheldrake watched it. He recalled the times he had laughed at the money he was given for the rights to his unfilmable scripts. The joke was no longer one that amused him.

Shortly after the film's release, a journalist asked him what he thought of the film. He launched into a tirade; they had missed the point; made it a whodunit. His version identified the Ripper near the beginning! The journalist had stuttered that the version of the book they had read had also withheld the identity of the Ripper until the end.

Sheldrake initially dismissed the claim as a junior reporter who had not done any research for the piece, but that evening, he kept thinking back to their confused comments.

Reaching down his author copy of the book, he leafed through the early pages, trying to find a familiar passage.

It was strange to him. He recognised the tell-tale scratchy linework of Ted Muldoon, but the dialogue was not his own; he was sure of it. He had always prided himself on his excellent recall. He remembered great swathes of the phone calls, great bank manager-worrying transatlantic calls between him and the artist when discussing the scripts. And he knew the rhythm of his words better than anyone.

As he thought about it, he noticed the rhythm of his veins at his temple. Faster than it should be. What was this, some bastardised film tie-in he had been sent? No, a quick flick to the front identified it as the 2000 edition. The publisher was a good friend.

Sheldrake had no need to look up the number. Nothing wrong with his memory.

'Shields. I need a word.'

'…Ey-up, Jim! How's it going, mate?'

'What did you fuckin' do to *Dear Boss*?'

‘Well, I fucking published it for you, Jim. What’s your problem?’

‘Thought you knew better. You don’t mess with me words.’

‘Eh? I don’t get you. Our edition was shot from Ted’s original pages.’

‘Then why’s it all fucked about within the copy you sent me?’

‘Listen, Jim. I dunno what you’re smoking tonight, but it’s two in the fucking morning. I’m hanging up now, before you say something we’ll both regret.’ Shields rang off.

Sheldrake sat with the receiver clamped to his ear, the dial tone an annoying drone.

Replacing it on the cradle at last, he stomped upstairs and started pulling apart stacks of comics until he turned up copies of the original issues of *Dear Boss*. He snatched them up, letting the piles of other titles slide off the furniture onto the floor.

Selecting the first issue, he compared it page by page with the version printed in the collection. Aside from the differences in paper stock and print quality, they were identical. He grabbed another at random, and leafed through the book until he found the right chapter. Again, page after page, like for like.

He pushed the comics aside and took up position in his armchair with the book and began to read. He paused only when his joint went out and required relighting.

Reaching the end, he sat and brooded. He flicked the light off and sat in the dark. Eventually, the sun rose, dimly illuminating the front room. *Dear Boss* slipped off his lap onto the floor at his feet. He let it. Words he spoke in 1995 came back to haunt him.

‘Do I think they’re ruining my books? Look. There they are, safe and sound.’

But that was not true. They were not safe. Not safe at all.

2002

Freshly returned from a jaunt to Nepal, Barrow had a touch of the flu, he believed. He had just enough energy to buy milk from the corner shop and fire up his laptop, switching all his social media accounts back on for the first time in a month. Then, the jetlag engulfed him. He barely made it to the futon before he crashed.

His mobile phone pinged weeks of alerts at him. They went unanswered as he sank down into the duvet, fell through the floorboards into the deep earth.

Thirty-six hours later, Barrow started awake at the plaintive phone battery alarm. His mouth was arid, his skin clammy from flop-sweat. Unsteadily, he made it to the kitchen and ran the cold tap, pouring and gulping three pints of water in

succession.

Plugging the phone into its charger, Barrow scanned his messages. Five from Frankie, a local artist friend, sent in the last couple of days.

'have u seen it?' The first message said.

'fuckin gobshite'

'u back?'

'bell me when u get this'

'kill that backstabbing prick if I see him'

Barrow's finger hovered over the call button, but he was not ready to talk to anyone yet. Instead, he went back to bed. The duvet cover was still drenched with his sweat, but he had no energy to change it. He pulled the duvet off the bed and onto the floor, and was out cold before his head touched the bedsheet.

Some indeterminate time later, Barrow felt a sharp pain in his foot. The room was in near-darkness, but after his eyes adjusted, he saw the ink-black homunculoid figure of Bobbie Buchanan crouched atop him, sawing furiously at the umbilical shadow connecting him to his former mentor.

Barrow let out a yelp, attracting its attention. Shadow Buchanan lifted his head to snarl a warning at him, before returning to his grizzly task. He pulled Barrow's leg up to his lips and tore into the shadowy cord with his teeth. The pain was excruciating. Barrow screamed as he felt the wet spray of ink rain over him.

He woke to find the mattress soaked.

Once Sheldrake had gotten his head around the nature of reality shifting under his feet, he returned to steadier ground, and published *Imaginary Friends Volume 2*. Any momentary pleasure at midwifing another story into the world was marred by news that Thunderhead Comics had been acquired by Gumshoe Periodicals.

Incensed to find himself once again under the thumb of a publisher he had grown to despise, Sheldrake downed tools, but was caught in a quandary. He had brought on board friends, good friends, and if he shit and stamped in it, he would be endangering their livelihoods.

Billy Nguyen's carbon footprint grew huge from the number of trips to Hampton he made, attempting to smooth Sheldrake's ruffled feathers. He impressed upon the Bard of Hampton that he would act as a firewall between Sheldrake and Gumshoe, with his personal guarantee of no interference from the suits. If Sheldrake had been acting alone, he would have walked, but loyalty led him to hold his tongue.

In the pages of *Karma Knights*, Barrow's avatar Imperious Rex reached a story

cliff-hanger where the Feaster Church held him prisoner. Readers turned the penultimate page of the issue to see a blade come down, severing his left arm before he could defeat them by hitting the Reset Button.

A simple enough story device, a shock tactic to titillate the audience, but Barrow went one better. He had made no public appearances since his Nepal trip. Editors were not worried, as the scripts arrived like clockwork, and sales remained steady.

There was a massive Comic convention held in San Diego on the weekend following Karma Knights' shock denouement, and Gideon Barrow was scheduled as their Guest of Honour. Chaperoned by a security detail at all times, Barrow took the stage in Hall H, filled with 6,500 screaming fans. The air was pregnant with anticipation, the smells of congealing nacho cheese and hot dogs mixing with barely masked body odour in the humid San Diego heat.

Barrow came on wearing full Imperious Rex regalia; the night-black sunglasses, pale Scots' skin, and head to toe vinyl skinsuit bedecked with buckles. He wore his patent leather trenchcoat draped across his shoulders, entirely covering his arms, and walked out with a purposeful stoop. With his gangling stride, he looked as though he was emulating Groucho Marx.

He stopped behind the mic, lifted his head to show a devilish grin as broad as Knight Errant's arch-nemesis'.

Basking in the adoration of his people, Barrow stood tall, the coat dropping to the floor behind him as he thrust his arm out wide. Arm singular. He had only the one, and a stump where the other used to sit.

Shock rippled out across the hall, interspersed with a few screams. Some laughed, assuming it was a publicity stunt, waiting for a punchline that did not arrive.

'Dinnae fret, pals! Ah've got another,' Barrow leaned in to the microphone, and waggled the fingers of his hand, 'Lucky for me, ah'm a rightie, eh?'

The aftermath of the appearance played out across the internet. It even made the network television news. Pundits argued about whether Barrow had written his disability into the comic after the accident, or if, as he insisted, it was a horrible piece of synchronicity.

Mental health advocates suggested that it was a clear cry for help, an act of self-harm. They recommended that Barrow should consider professional help, though in his public appearances he seemed perfectly well-adjusted.

'Ah'd been off on a wee jaunt tae Nepal, lovely place, by the way. When ah goat back tae mah flat, ah thought ah'd brung back a flu bug or somethin'. Turned out

that's not aw ah'd brung back. Paracetamol widnae touch it. Ah wis getting' behind wi' scripts. Figured ah'd crack on an' get caught up before ah went tae the doc. If ah'd left it two more days, ah'd have pegged it, they said.'

2003

In a cross-promotional campaign strategy that would set the template for future releases, the third Finn Foster novel, *Finn Foster and the Night Mayor* was published simultaneously with the theatrical debut of the Black Sun movie adaptation. Each notched up the sales of all the others, further propelling ML Montague into the world of the super-rich.

Buchanan created a new comic miniseries called *Public Enemy*, about super-assassins. He asked the artist to make the lead character look like a prominent rap star. By the time the second issue was published, the movie deal was already in place.

Despite owning the rights to *Imaginary Friends* the comic, Sheldrake had sold the movie rights before his change of heart, so he could do nothing to prevent the release of an Imaginary Friends motion picture.

He endeavoured to fight back against it by refusing to acknowledge its existence. He was fully aware that this stance might be seen by some as him being an utter Cnut.

Refusing any interviews from media outlets wanting to discuss the adaptation, Sheldrake managed to keep reality at bay, at least in Hampton. However, reality bit back in an imaginative, if ludicrous, manner.

A lawsuit was launched by an aspiring screenwriter who claimed that his screenplay had been plagiarised and renamed *Imaginary Friends* to avoid payment. Sheldrake was among the accused. According to the allegation, Sheldrake had written the comic for the studio as a smokescreen to cover the theft. All this despite his longstanding reputation for defending creators' rights and his distaste for multinational corporations. The accusation was so outlandish that Sheldrake might even have found it amusing, had he not been forced to endure several hours of cross-examination in court to defend the truth of the matter.

Worst of all: after his testimony, the studio bean counters made a settlement with the screenwriter, just to make him go away.

To the studio, this was just business. To Sheldrake, this was an unforgiveable

betrayal, which made it appear as though he was guilty of the accusation.

The film was nothing like the comic and a box office disaster.

After the quarterly financial meeting, nobody at Viscount Pictures would ever spare a second's thought on the lawsuit, but Sheldrake would never forget it.

He had learned from his experience with *Dear Boss*, and found esoteric ways to protect *Imaginary Friends* from similar shenanigans. His words would remain his own.

In the early days of his career, he had dealt with devils and justified it to himself. He had sold his creations, and sold them cheap. Betrayal after betrayal. The sweat of his labours would no longer go to build the empires of others. Creators should control their creations. He set about his bookshelves, removing any volumes of his work to which he did not retain the intellectual property rights. Out went *TickTockMen*. Away to *The Secret*. Bye-bye, *UKGent*. *The Life and Times of Nova Smith* went out. He deliberately left the gaps they had occupied on the shelf as reminders. In time, he knew, there would be new works to fill the gaps, and more besides.

Corporations only spoke the language of Mammon. They thought nothing of people, nothing of creators, except as a means of accruing more money. They would screw over a brother if it made them an extra penny. Well, thought Sheldrake, if they understood only the language of money, he would speak to them in terms they would understand.

The next time he received a royalty cheque from Gumshoe, he tore it in two and returned it with the instruction that in future, he wished any monies to be paid to his co-creators. Likewise, his share of the money for adaptations of *The Secret* and *TickTockMen*; a considerable sum, was to be shared among the artists.

He issued the same declaration to every publisher who owned his babies.

He felt better, *purer*. Sheldrake the Grey reborn as Sheldrake the White.

2004

As part of the publicity drive for the third volume of *Karma Knights*, Barrow called a press conference. He built up to the announcement with a month of cryptic messages on his blog and coded instructions hidden in the pages of the comic.

Reporters joined Barrow at the High Rock Hotel in Las Vegas, with a laser show and opening with a dark room.

The assembled press sat in the dark, the only illuminations their cell phones. They mumbled to each other, wondering what Barrow must have planned for them this time.

A holographic image of the *Karma Knights* logo appeared, and everyone fell

silent. The words ‘Volume Three’ below it. Any reaction from the audience was drowned out by high octane rapcore.

Keeping time with the beat, panel by panel, the opening scene *of Karma Knights* volume three filled the performance space. Imperious Rex had infiltrated an alien vessel, where he manipulated their technology for reasons unknown.

The final splash-page flashed up, revealing Imperious Rex with a regrown arm. The track ended, and the room was plunged back into darkness.

When the lights came up, they revealed Gideon Barrow sitting behind a table, frozen in the same pose as the page they had just witnessed.

He waggled the fingers of his left hand and gave the journalists one of his trademark grins.

‘So,’ he said, ‘any questions?’

Over the next few months, whenever Barrow was asked about his arm, and he was asked a lot, he gave a different explanation.

‘Ah woke up, an’ it were just back, y’ken?’

‘Iss aw just Hollywood smoke an’ mirrors, man.’

‘Spent some of mah riches on a robot arm. Just call me Bionic Barrow frae now on.’

‘Had mah hand in mah pocket the whole time, honest to God.’

The mainstream press claimed to have uncovered the truth, interviewing a former friend of Barrow’s who was a Hollywood SFX prosthetics artist. He claimed that it started as a bet between the two of them, that he could fake a missing arm well enough to bear close scrutiny. He did not realise that Barrow would take it so far. The trick supposedly explained, the world lost interest.

Nobody wanted the truth.

Amazing Comics dug deeply into their corporate pockets to poach Buchanan from Gumshoe Periodicals. They were eager to get him to repeat the award-winning formula for their creative stable; specifically, to reinvigorate their big team book. He eventually signed on the dotted line and went on to write *The Absolutes* for the next three years. He leveraged the profile that this gave him into negotiations for movie options on his own work.

His widescreen visual approach mimicked the look of big action blockbuster movies, and he continued to use movie stars as models for his lead characters. This time, he refined the trick, picking actors who were known comic fans.

Appealing to their vanity; they were less likely to sue for unauthorised use of their likeness if they liked how they were used.

Flush from his recent successes, and growing interest in adapting his work for other media, Buchanan announced the launch of 'Planet Buchanan', an imprint where he could gather all his creator-owned series. Rather than spreading himself across several different publishers, he promoted Planet Buchanan as his one-stop shop for movie producers. Having his name in the title had worked for Walt Disney, after all.

2005

At midnight on the Summer Solstice, in Belgravia, *Finn Foster and the Somnambulist* was published. As had become tradition, sales records hopped, skipped and jumped over the previous high-water mark. The gala launch was filled to the rafters with the great and good, but more importantly the rich, and Montague had strong-armed her publisher into making it a fundraiser. Each of the top tier attendees had paid a scandalous amount of money to Montague's charities; a tax-deductible expense enabling them to brag that they had been there.

Who needed an Alkahest to dissolve prison bars or dull matter, if you could turn paper and ink into power and influence? The next night, it was time for the red carpet premiere of *Finn Foster and the Night Mayor*, with Montague and the stars of the film escorted into the cinema under a hail of flash photography.

Against Jim Sheldrake's express desire, but legally, Webber Brothers' adaptation of *The Secret* opened internationally, to mixed reviews.

Sheldrake endured the usual barrage of interview requests. The same lines were trotted out each time. Sheldrake would not see the film. He did not approve of it. He no longer had a copy of the book. Creators should own their work.

There was a marked difference how interviewers handled this. There were those that talked about *TickTockMen* and *The Secret*, and painted him as a bitter and possibly mad, old recluse, obsessed with the bad business decisions of his past, and those who asked him about literally anything else. The latter showed Sheldrake as personable, puckish and good-natured; authoritative on almost any subject raised. Particularly if it could be related to his home town of Hampton. Which, with Sheldrake, it usually could.

The former? Sheldrake had this to say about the former:

'People get all worked up about me being a magician. I can assure you, magicians like me, we're fluffy bunnies. It's the bards you wanna watch out for.

Piss me off, and what am I gonna do? Make your hens lay funny? Sour your milk? No big deal, is it? Mess with a bard, and forget about putting a curse on you, they might put a satire on you. And if they're any good, your reputation is destroyed in your community, your family, your kids, in your own eyes. Generations after you're dead, people are still gonna be laughing at what a wanker you were.' (Jim Sheldrake interview, 2005)

2006

Searching for a project to fill the void after the multi-volume magnum opus of *Karma Knights*, Barrow decided it was time to throw himself back into the mainstream. With one eye on the market and one on the rise of his former protégé, who had managed to become Hollywood's preferred dance partner while Barrow had not been paying attention.

Barrow would spend the next few years bouncing between Gumshoe Periodicals and Amazing, the two big US publishers, playing them off against each other for better contracts and the chance to play with the best toys in their boxes. He committed to servicing the biggest brands in the business: *NewOmeN, Team Supreme* and *UltiMan*. The work was good, but without the transgressive bite of his creator-owned work.

It was the trade-off for getting the top-selling titles. Editorial interference and creative restrictions. Play nice, or you don't get to play at all. He entered into the agreement with both eyes open.

A collective of hackers, protesters and anti-authority activists who clustered under the umbrella identity 'Anonymous' started to draw inspiration from the works of Jim Sheldrake. There was widespread adoption of the mask worn by Sheldrake's terrorist hero *The Secret*.

The Secret's 'Question Skull Mask' had been sold originally as a promotional toy for the film, but rather than selling while the movie was in cinemas and then being dumped in bargain bins in favour of the next raft of movie merchandising, instead, stores found, if anything, demand for the masks increased. For the budding social activist who had a protest to attend and a healthy distrust of government surveillance, the Question Mask was a cheap and easily obtainable identity-hiding option.

Sheldrake's own anti-establishment streak was well known. While he had disowned *The Secret* as one of his errant children with an old partner that he was denied visiting rights to see, his heart strings were tugged by the thought that he had inspired, however tangentially, a generation to take the authorities to task,

much as his protagonist did in the comic.

Any pride at the repurposing of his decades-old comic by young anarchists bent on civil disobedience was tempered by the irony that every mask sold put money into the coffers of Webber Brothers, the corporation who owned the rights.

2007

Finn Foster and the Empty Grave, the final book in the sequence was published, with a fanfare unseen since the days of Beatlemania or Mutakfever. The adaptation of the penultimate book, *Finn Foster and the Somnambulist* had its official release marred by the appearance of a leaked copy on the Jolly Roger site several weeks before the premiere. It had proven every bit as record-breaking on the torrent sites as it had on every other list.

Once Montague had been made aware of the leak, she wondered what could be done about it. Unbidden, the pirate torrent sites found themselves under attack by a foe far more dangerous than the international copyright police.

The Grumblings got to work. Denizens of SunDown, their favourite food was what they called Teck-Noller-Gee. Torrent servers were a tasty treat to them, and whether she knew it or not, Montague's creations did her bidding, and the Grumblings ate their fill.

The media dubbed it Torrentgeddon, and international taskforces fell over themselves to claim credit for the fall of the pirates.

Every time a torrent site resurfaced, a hungry Grumbling licked its lips and patted its belly.

2008

Bobbie Buchanan's latest comics miniseries, *Ass-Kicker* was released, and became the shining star title of the Planet Buchanan imprint. His take on the teenage vigilante sub-genre, it took the usual tropes and turns the volume up to a bone-crunching eleven. With the movie adaptation of his last series *Public Enemy* gaining reasonable numbers in cinemas, *Ass-Kicker* had a development deal before Buchanan had written the first script.

2009

The year of the *TickTockMen* movie. Having been unable to buy Sheldrake's support – or at least silence – with money, Webber Brothers came up with an

alternative gambit. They preceded their play with a proposition.

Sheldrake's best friend, novelist Simon Sheldrake (no relation), was in dire financial straits. Webber Brothers let it be known that they would be prepared to offer him the novelisation of *TickTockMen*, on the understanding that Jim Sheldrake would play ball. Sheldrake requested that his name be removed from any advertising for the film, and in return, he agreed to keep his own counsel when it came to discussion of the movie.

The artist of *TickTockMen*, Steve Mandrill, still had a decent relationship with the publisher, and so became the de facto point of contact for all promotion regarding the movie. He also maintained his friendship with Sheldrake, and in the build-up to its release, rang often to discuss things.

The subject of Sheldrake's agreement arose during one such conversation.

'The director realised that all the Black Galleon pirate comic scenes won't work in the film…'

'Thought they might,' Sheldrake said.

'So, they're gonna do an animated feature and do 'em separately. They also want to put out a comic version. Y'know, a comic of the comic within the comic?'

'Who are they crediting it to? They're not putting my name on it, are they?'

'They said they'll put the name you came up with, who supposedly wrote the Black Galleon comics in *TickTockMen*.'

'Hang on though,' Sheldrake said, 'If they're doing that, how will anyone know it wasn't me? Do you reckon they'll put a disclaimer inside? Jim Sheldrake had nothink to do with this comic, or summat?'

'Don't see why not. Sounds a reasonable compromise to me. I'll tell 'em.'

'No worries, then.'

'Yeah, they said you'd be *'quietly compliant'*.' Mandrill laughed.

'Quietly compliant? Have they forgotten who I am?' Sheldrake scoffed. He later asked for his name to be taken off the credits for the film, and in what he could only see as spite, Webber Brothers spiked the novelisation. Simon Sheldrake (no relation) had to break the news to him.

He now knew what they meant by quietly compliant.

Sheldrake saw the act as nothing less than a declaration of war, and decided that all bets were off and he was free to say whatever he liked.

'When that business with the novelisation happened, I cursed the production and everything to do with it. And I use the word 'curse' in a professional manner. Next thing I knew, another studio had taken Webber Brothers to court, and as a special Christmas present for me, the judge awarded in their favour, so Webbers have to give them a hefty chunk of the profits. I wouldn't like to say that my

curse had anything to do with it, but it gives me a rosy glow to think that my diabolical powers had triumphed.'

After the movie's release, Sheldrake finally agreed to pass comment.

'I've heard that it's great seeing Steve's images up there on screen with added movement and noises, but to put it cruelly, it's nice that there's a children's version out there for people who couldn't manage to follow a superhero comic from the 1980s.'

In a private ceremony, attended only by Sheldrake and his glove puppet snake deity Glycon, the Bard of Hampton symbolically cut his final ties to the mainstream comics industry. He performed a ritual involving a magic circle, an athame blade and the intonation of a piece of verse written specifically for the purpose, which he burned at the ritual's conclusion.

By way of celebration, he rang Colin Shields and settled the disagreement between them over *Dear Boss* that had marred their friendship.

Top Drawer were reinstated as Sheldrake's preferred publisher, launching the new arrangement with the first volume of *Imaginary Friends: The Hundred Year War*, set in 1910.

A letter slid through the letterbox of the green door, marked for the attention of Jim Sheldrake. It bore the royal crest. Upon reading the contents, Sheldrake hooted with laughter for at least ten minutes. He called up to his second wife, Belinda.

'Ere, Bel! Come and look at this, will you?'

She did, and she laughed for longer than he had, and started him chuckling again.

'They really don't know you at all, do they?'

Having extracted the maximum merriment from the luxurious paper, he filed it away in the bin, and went back to his typewriter.

After the RSVP had remained unanswered for the designated period on the letter, a telephone call was made. The number was short, and had no area code.

The phone rang in a darkened office, designated for use by a branch of Special Section, one that was unlisted on any hierarchical map of the secret service.

'He had his chance.'

It was the hour before dawn when they came for Sheldrake. The darkest hour. He was sat in his chair, working, when he heard the door frame splinter, the carved

green woodwork give way under repeated blows.

He barely had time to stand before the masked men burst into the living room, and restrained him. He tried to reach for his cane, but a vicious kick sent him in one direction and the cane in another.

They took no chances. One of the men broke the snake-topped stick across his knee. It took two attempts.

They wrenched his arms behind his back, and zip tie nylon cuffs were employed, pulled tighter than he thought strictly necessary.

'Should've took the medal, mate!' the cane snapper said.

'Just do the fucking job!' another cut in, and stuffed a bag over Sheldrake's head, muffling his booming protests.

He kicked out blindly, ineffectually against their body armour.

'Jim? Jim? What's going on?' Belinda had woken and reached the top of the stairs.

'You just stay put…' Sheldrake heard through the bag as he was bustled out of his house.

Belinda's screams followed them out into the street.

Tyres screeched, and they were gone before the first neighbour's curtain twitched.

2010

Montague attended the world premiere of *Finn Foster and the Empty Grave*, last in the series. In the years since the movies began, the child actors had sprouted to reach the cusp of adulthood, confirmed by the editorial decision of tabloid shibboleth The Orb that the young actress inhabiting the role of Foster's best friend Gillian was finally old enough for their lecherous attention.

By now, Montague was used to seeing fans turn up to signings and public appearances dressed as her characters. It no longer unnerved her to shake their hands or pose for their selfies.

It did mean that she was unaware when some of them were the real deal.

Usually, fans would base their characterisations on the actors in the adaptations, rather than the versions in the books. It still caught her when a cosplayer captured the essence of a character exactly as it had appeared in her head, including details not committed to the page.

'Lucky guess,' she thought.

Children were still going missing on their way to school, as if vanishing into that secret silver river that flows beside reality, lured aboard the Diamond Gondola by its Half-Ogre Gondalier. The police were no nearer to catching the

culprit, and no trace of the vanished had ever been found. She committed a lot of her time and money to a media campaign encouraging children and their parents to take extra care, even appearing in the adverts.

The campaign bore some fruit, but children, around Finn Foster's age in the first book, continue to disappear.

And sightings of Finn Foster's nemesis, the Nameless Dread, were on the rise.

For all the stories of missing children connected to things she had written that could almost certainly be ruled out as coincidence, Montague still felt weighed down by guilt. The more famous Finn Foster and his world became, the more the correlation would be suggested.

The decision was made. And she was horrified that it put her in accord with the villain of her books. Even though the last book had already been published, Finn Foster would have to die.

Camp Gulliver was a Category X prison, believed to be in Norfolk, but even the Cromwell Court Service drivers called upon to transfer prisoners there, did not seem sure. As though they all forgot about it as soon as they pulled away from the gates.

Nobody remembered transferring Jim Sheldrake to Gulliver, and that was how the Governor preferred it.

Taking a leaf from the Marquis de Sade, Sheldrake managed to smuggle out pages of script for the second volume of *Imaginary Friends: The Hundred Year War* from his prison cell, scrawled on bedsheets.

Set in 1969, and parodying the wave of espionage characters who sprang up at that time, in the character of the master-spy Malachi Yarrow, by the time the prison authorities caught wind of the supply route and closed it down, it was too late.

After the horse had bolted, Camp Gulliver's Governing Governor instigated a security clampdown. Any prisoner found with the tools of their trade, the pen and the paper, was taken to the Seg.

Gulliver's Segregation Unit had been modified to make passing contraband to anyone with access to the outside world virtually impossible. Lockdown searches of cells happened at random, with the aim of reinforcing the prison rules.

First they came for the pens and the paper, the fountain and the foolscap.

Then, the biro. The needles. Even the paperclip.

The walls were painted with anti-graffiti coatings.

And still, the writers would find a way. There was not an obstacle that staff could place in the way that a motivated author could not write their way over,

under or around. It was as though it was something they had trained for their whole careers.

Prison officers began to be vetted for suspicious behaviour. Enthusiastic readers were discouraged wherever possible.

When the Seg proved to be insufficiently robust for his special prisoners, the Governor called for extra resources. They came in the form of a special wing, kitted out with all manner of sensory deprivation screens, and staffed by *very* special officers.

'Whatever you do, don't throw me in that briar patch, Governor,' Sheldrake said, 'Whatever shall I do in a room on me own, with just me own thoughts to keep me company?'

A writer left to his own devices, with no disturbances to stop him thinking deep thoughts.

Sheldrake dove deep.

Bobbie Buchanan stood back to survey his mighty works, as advertising hoardings promoting the release of *Ass-Kicker – The Movie* sprang up across the States. Movies, he saw, were the way forward.

From that day forward, when a comics project did not get snapped up by one of the major movie studios, he downed tools and buried it. Sometimes, he did it after the first issue had been published, burning bridges with artists and readers along the way. But the way ahead was paved with gold.

His name began to crawl higher and higher in the credits. First in the thanks column, then 'inspired by', 'based on the graphic novel by' and finally nestling among the producers.

2011

While Sheldrake thought his deep thoughts, he was still able to access IdeaSpace. From his cell in Camp Gulliver, there was some sort of release, though entry was no longer easy for him.

The reservoir of the collective unconscious awaited him, and he drank his fill. And yet, he was frustrated. The cocktail of meds the prison hospital had him on interfered with his communion. He no longer strode across imaginary continents like he owned them. Instead, he was forced to haunt the hinterlands, a voyeur where once he had been Emperor; The Emperor of Ice Cream.

He could look but not touch. For now, that had to be enough, but Sheldrake turned his mind to thoughts of escape. He *would* find a plot twist, achieve liberation.

As with all the best stories, the twist was something built into the narrative much earlier; a card that could be turned when the story demanded it.

'Dear Mister Shelldrake,

I have been reading THE SECRET alot and I really like it. Can you tell me who is THE SECRET? I think it is a Policeman. Love DOUGLAS, Age 8.

Jim replies: Ah, but that would be telling! The Secret could be anyone. Your dad, your little sister, or it could even be you!' (Letters page, SPITFIRE COMIC, issue dated May 12th 1984)

What had brought that little memory nugget back to him? Sheldrake wondered. One of countless readers' letters he had dreamed up for Spitfire during the early days of his career to supplement his income. Hardly a character at all; a brief sketch to push one of his comic strips ahead of the pack of equally starving freelance writers. They'd all done it.

And yet, he clearly saw the piercing eyes of Douglas, Age 8. No need at all for details beyond those brief sentences, but he had a face, clothes and backstory, even if his life was meant to begin and end on the letters page. Summoning the memory of those eyes, Sheldrake realised that he had brought Douglas, Age 8 back for encore performances in other works. Never the lead; always lurking somewhere in the panel backgrounds, mixing with the stock characters. A Victorian street urchin in *Dear Boss*; a troubled teen caught up in the events of *The Man*.

The boy who invented his own imaginary spy: X-12 in *Imaginary Friends: The Hundred Year War: 1969*. Perhaps there was something more for him to do. A character already in play, he would be able to slip through Camp Gulliver's bars.

Something to think on.

As waves of chemical inhibitors pumped through him, Sheldrake's footing in IdeaSpace faltered and he was unceremoniously dumped back into his body. He did not consciously know it – safer that way – but he had a plan.

Back in IdeaSpace, a young man with an intense stare and a wicked scar across his face stood on the shore where Sheldrake had been moments before. Dressed in prison issue greys, he did not move. Not quite tangible, he remained paused. Behind him, the sceneshifters decloaked. The man in black laid a hand on his right shoulder, while his female colleague did likewise on the left.

'Seed planted,' she said.

As the tide rolled in, the trio were washed away.

Under the new regime, the prisoners on the Special Wing, often just Sheldrake, but sometimes there were others, were locked down for twenty hours per day.

Red Band prisoners were let onto the wing for brief periods; to clean and replace necessities. Wearing ear defenders and white waxed jumpsuits, they had explicit instructions not to look at the walls in case they had been written on; avoid the Specials; put any dirty linen straight in the incinerators.

Then, off the wing as soon as possible, straight to decontamination, a handful of meds and a debriefing. All to make certain that they hadn't brought anything out with them, inside or out.

Sheldrake peered at the Red Band cleaner from the shadows. Not the usual guy. He stepped closer.

The cleaner seemed alarmed by Sheldrake's appearance. His milky right eye, the left bottle green, narrowing upon him. The wild mane of hair, sprouting from every available space on his head; his only clothing. His skin, scabbed and filth-encrusted. Sheldrake knew he must look a sight, but he carried no shame.

When they took away his clothes, he made a book of himself. Every inch of skin he could reach, he wrote on. So they scoured him until he bled. Again and again.

'Burn?' he mouthed to the Red Band, who just looked confused, pointing up at his ear defenders.

He panicked when he realised he was not wearing them.

'Got any burn, mate? Or papers? Papers are good.'

He finally gets it, but pats down his jumpsuit where the pockets might have been, and realised he was not wearing his gloves either.

Sheldrake wondered if the cleaner knew he was dreaming.

'Sorry. They took 'em.'

'Then what good are you?' Sheldrake spat, turned his back and stalked back off into shadow. Then he changed his mind. He looked deeper, seeing the Red Band properly for the first time. The scarred face – tramlines, they called them inside. The piercing gaze. Familiar.

He tilted his head to the side and wagged a finger.

'You're marked?'

'I've got a tattoo, yeah.' He pulled down the zip on his jumpsuit, and Sheldrake saw Tweetie Pie on his bicep.

'Ah!' Sheldrake said, 'One of mine. I don't own you. Do what you want.'

Sheldrake said he did not own the Red Band, and that he should do what he wanted, but from that moment, he did, and the cleaner did what Sheldrake

wanted.

And when he walked out of Camp Gulliver a free man, just days later; his memories stolen by a combination of drugs and other procedures, he carried Sheldrake's shadow with him.

2012

Through the prison grapevine, word reached Sheldrake that Gideon Barrow had been offered an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours. And that he had accepted it.

'Course he did,' Sheldrake said, and chuckled to himself.

Through the symbiotic relationship Sheldrake shared with Story, his newly christened proxy on the out, the sacred ink flowed across his skin; the hand unmistakably Sheldrake's scrawl. Line by line, the new working was born into the world. Painstakingly, Story transcribed the script and placed it in the hands of its other father, the artist Steve O'Dowd. Performing his own brand of sorcery, he transformed alphanumeric glyphs into pictograms. Words and pictures fused together to create something greater than either alone.

Sheldrake and O'Dowd brought their Imaginary Friends almost up to the present in the third and final volume of *The Hundred Years War*, the stage set for 2009. They had to tread on eggshells with the exploitation of modern fictions; the creators were not only breathing, but still working. And in some cases, litigious.

From one perspective, it could be considered flattery. To be considered influential enough by a peer to be placed among the annals of fiction to feature prominently in the book, but Sheldrake's parody recast Finn Foster as the Antichrist; a metaphor for the way in which, he felt, the literary canon had fallen so far in a century.

Montague, naturally, disagreed. She thought she had put aside any personal distaste for Sheldrake when she killed her character Standish Lopsiday; the wizard who since his creation had worn his face. But some grudges could outlast death itself.

Buchanan published *The Civil Service* comic. Two parts James Bond, one part Educating Rita, shaken, stirred and served in an Oxford brogue, it detailed the rise of a streetwise thug to become a gentleman spy. With added movie star cameos and scenes of questionable taste.

A director for the inevitable movie was signed up on the strength of a two line pitch on the back of a restaurant napkin.

2013

A crime novel entitled *Counting Down to Zero* was published, with very little fanfare, Sales were reasonable, mid-list numbers, but not quite what the publisher had in mind for their debut author, Jamie Dalwhinnie.

Two weeks after release, it became known that Jamie Dalwhinnie was a pseudonym for ML Montague. The internet caught fire with the news, and the book became a best-seller overnight.

Montague was disappointed that her attempt to escape her celebrity, and have a fresh start in a new genre, had been exposed so quickly. Her attempt to distance herself from Finn Foster, to stop feeding the beast, had failed. Freed from audience expectations of whatever she published post Finn Foster, being Jamie Dalwhinnie should have allowed her to sidestep the hype machine and receive trustworthy feedback. It could be all about the writing.

Early rumours suggested that *Counting Down to Zero*'s tepid launch sales had alarmed the publisher, or the publicity department, and someone had panicked, leaking Dalwhinnie's identity to the red tops. By the time cooler heads became involved, it was too late to retract.

The official story was that an unnamed intern had accidentally read an internal memo for Dalwhinnie's editor, and told their best friend in confidence, only for them to tell five others, one of whom contacted the tabloid press.

In truth, it was slightly more complicated than that, though it could be summarised in four words.

The sceneshifters did it.

Cinemas rolled out the welcome mat for *Ass-Kicker 2*, another jewel in Buchanan's crown. Still flushed with its success, he received the call from Buck House, and added an MBE to his growing trophy cabinet, for services to entertainment.

Barrow watched on, fuming as his former boy sidekick accepted the medal, and slickly turned the ceremony into a promotional opportunity to plug his latest projects.

He counted the number of box office successes Buchanan had been involved in to date and matched them against his own. Just the one, albeit a box-office smash, and that one only by burglary. No, not burglary. Taking and driving away.

With the memory of the honours ceremony fresh in his mind, Barrow accepted an interview request from *Rolling Stone*, which would pick at the scab of his former friendship with Buchanan. He was asked if he was likely to run into Buchanan, given that they still both lived in Glasgow.

‘Aye, fair chance. Fair old chance. Ah only hope ah’m doing a hundred mile an hour when ah do.’

2015

It was another bumper year for Bobbie Buchanan. The release of *Civil Servant*, the movie adaptation of his series *The Civil Service.* His services were requested as part of the Amazing Studios series of movies exploiting the treasure chest of intellectual properties published by Amazing Comics. The first fruit of that consultancy appeared as *The Curious Quartet* movie.

Word of mouth on the movie was not great, but the surprise success of *Civil Servant* more than made up for it, and a sequel was in active development within the week.

Buchanan, much like the studio itself, quietly erased *The Curious Quartet* from his CV.

2016

After many years of promising, 2016 was the year that Jim Sheldrake finished his novel. Nine years in the making, with chapter after chapter materialising on Story’s body, to be squirrelled away until the whole work was complete. *Babel.*

The episodic novel was set entirely within the bounds of one small deprived area of Hampton, the Delves, where Sheldrake himself had grown up.

Despite his incarceration in Camp Gulliver, he was insistent to his publisher that a launch event for *Babel* must be arranged. He specified that it must be staged in Hampton, naturally, and there were other, more esoteric, stipulations to be followed to the letter.

Story was to be present throughout, which seemed appropriate, as he was to all intents and purposes Sheldrake’s stunt double: the conduit through which his stories reached the world. The public at large was unaware that Sheldrake was behind bars. The eccentric author was a shut-in recluse; he chose to let his work speak for him these days, after flying too close to celebrity in his past dealings with the likes of Amazing Comics and Gumshoe Periodicals. Friends and family knew better, but kept the secret.

Colin Shields arranged a traditional book launch, staged in an independent bookstore in Hampton. The heart of the town at the centre of the country. A selection of wine, soft drinks, nibbles; a stage area surrounded by bookshelves; two comfortable chairs, half-turned to each other in front of the audience seats; a low table with water jug and glasses; centre stage was a replica tower of Babel.

Stacked cylindrically, over six feet high, flanked by the chairs, each book a brick in the construction.

All the trappings of a standard book launch.

All of it smoke and mirrors.

The Patriot: War of Independence was released, a movie based on a Buchanan comic, but tinkered with to better fit the Amazing Cinematic Universe.

The Amazing think-tank have their fingerprints all over the script, and box-office returns were enough to remove any doubts after the fizzle of *The Curious Quartet.*

An hour before the start of the *Babel* book launch, a sizeable crowd had already gathered in the bookshop. On Colin Shields' suggestion, Story had arrived early and was camped out in the store room away from the public, to make for a better opening to the event.

Shields paced the room nervously, seeing to every detail. He asked for the glasses to be replaced with clean ones, waved people away from straying too close to the tottering stack of hardcovers on the stage, and directed them toward the table containing copies that could be safely browsed or purchased in advance, without the risk of a Jenga-based accident occurring.

As per Sheldrake's request, incidental music for the event was provided by a Hampton-based goth band of his acquaintance, *The Songs Of Snakes.* Story had received his own instructions for the event directly from Sheldrake, via the tattoo ink that magically travelled his body, but the ink remained silent today.

Sheldrake was busy elsewhere.

There was a knock on the store room door. It was time to meet the public.

Storm clouds gathered over Camp Gulliver. Not that anyone inside the prison noticed, enclosed within its windowless environs.

On the Special Wing, Sheldrake returned to his body after a particularly fruitful expedition into IdeaSpace. He had flown over Hampton, checked on his beloved Belinda. Saw that everything was prepared for *Babel* to be born. And finally, just as he knew it would be as soon as the stars aligned, the mystery was revealed to him. Returning to flesh, he returned armed.

Later, when special investigators visited the site, and sifted through the rubble of the Special Wing, they would be convinced that somehow, Sheldrake had engineered some sort of improvised explosive device in his cell. But he had a much more powerful weapon than that.

He had remembered his magic word.

He spoke it, and the heavens shook.

Since his release from prison, Story's appearance had increasingly grown to resemble Sheldrake's own, though his beard would need time to catch up, and his tramlines would always mark him differently.

Still, some attendees at the book launch thought he was the author, rather than the transcriber. As the next best thing to Sheldrake himself, Story was interviewed by Shields. The publisher detailed the long and winding road to publication through nine years of writing. Story knew the book almost as well as Sheldrake, having been the vellum upon which it had been written, and the hand that had copied it onto paper.

The discussion was followed by a short Q and A session. Enquiries about Sheldrake's whereabouts were deftly sidestepped.

Shields kept checking his watch.

'We have time for one last question,' he said.

'What's Mr Sheldrake working on next, and when will we see it?' a middle-aged woman in the second row asked.

Shields laughed, 'He's just written a six hundred thousand word novel that took nine years to write! Give him–'

Story put a hand on Shields' arm to halt him in mid-flow.

'Jim's first novel, *Firelight Tales* was three hundred pages long and set all around Hampton and took three years to write. *Babel* was twelve hundred pages in one area of Hampton and took him nine years. He told me, if he does a third, it'll be two thousand pages and set in the corner of his living room.'

The assembled crowd laughed appreciatively.

'I'm not entirely sure he was joking,' Story deadpanned, 'but you may have to wait a while to find out.'

Shields tapped his watch and rose to his feet.

'Well, thank you for coming everyone. I hope you've all enjoyed yourselves, enjoyed our hospitality and bought your copies of *Babel*. But now it's time for the conclusion of the evening's revels. We've saved the best till last.' He turned and nodded to Story.

Story rolled up his shirt sleeve. There was a word written upon it, too small for anyone else to read. He spoke it, too softly for anyone to hear.

Ink ran down his arms and spun out into the air. While he stood, his shadow twitched and loosened itself from him, walking along the floor to the stack of books. The ink swam through the air to follow it.

The books started to vibrate, and the tower began to yaw and pitch precariously. The covers flapped open, pages began to concertina. The tower, as though whatever force had been animating the books had stopped, fell straight down to the floor.

The fall was finely controlled; so although the audience members in the front row had scrambled to get out of the way, they had been in no danger.

When the books had settled into a mound, they began to move again. A slow fountain of paper rose up and reshaped itself, drawing on the mass of books to sculpt a body; a human form.

First the skeleton, then drawing more pages, shifting and morphing to form muscles and soft tissue, organs; everything a growing boy would need. Skin and hair last of all.

So much hair.

Pigment oozed out of the paper, completing the semblance of life.

Jim Sheldrake opened his eyes, and spoke.

'I'm back!'

2017

Montague took up a new pastime, using her celebrity to take pot-shots at the newly elected 45th President of the United States of America.

Twitter was his favourite method of communication, and Montague weaponised her tweets and returned fire.

'His harshest critics must acknowledge that @realDanielStrunk shows true leadership in the war on reality.'

'Close your eyes. Open a telephone directory. Point at the page. Open your eyes. That's the name of the person who could do better than this.'

'Strunk says 'just words, folks.' It's his accusation and his defence. Words don't matter. Facts don't matter. If they don't, we're all lost.' (ML Montague's Twitter Feed, 2017)

In his first hundred days in office, President Daniel Strunk rolled back reforms passed over decades of previous administrations; he branded all media that did not confirm to his version of truth as 'Fake News', and signed Executive Orders to force through the most contentious of legislation without oversight.

He was, to all but his most ardent supporters, of whom there were many, the very worst traits of humankind bound up in a single fleshsuit.

Many thought that he was such a grotesque caricature, so exaggerated in his

mannerisms, he could not possibly be real. It must be some sort of elaborate hoax. That the punchline would be coming any day now.

Others said, 'You couldn't make this shit up.'

Her Majesty's Government became increasingly embarrassed by the Montague/Strunk Tweet War, playing out across the World Wide Web for all to see, at a time when the Prime Minister was going cap in hand to the Americans for favourable treatment. And yet, they did not want to set themselves against the immensely popular author.

Their solution was to attempt to bring Montague to heel with the offer of a second gong from the monarchy. Montague accepted the bribe, and was awarded the Order of the Companions of Honour – and then failed, once more, to change in any way.

Despite the government's best efforts to cloak it under a D Notice, the broadsheets broke the story of Camp Gulliver's closure. The articles emphasised the waste of taxpayers' money and the secretive nature of the establishment, as they could not find a single witness able or willing to give them any concrete facts about the place.

The tabloids, never shy about running with alternative facts when reality did not fit their agenda, propounded a wild assortment of nonsensical reasons for the closure, from riots to it having been a secret detention centre for Islamic extremists along the lines of Guantanamo Bay.

Barrow watched as Buchanan's name appeared on film after film; he brooded from afar. His own screenplays still languished in turnaround, and another, originally written as a movie script, then converted for TV, was unable to catch a cold. He debated whether to rework it as a comic, but could summon no enthusiasm.

As time went on, he grew increasingly suspicious of Buchanan's success, and how he believed it was connected to his own failure. Was Buchanan souring his deals, using his newfound clout in Hollywood? Was he leeching from him in some subtler way?

The dream visited him, night after night, where Buchanan was Barrow's shadow, sawing his way free from Barrow's control. An idea came to him, and it would not let him go. He tried to test it from a rational scientific viewpoint. He went to anger management classes and courses on mindfulness. Still he could not shake it.

Somehow, his continuing success in comics and the blissful state of his marriage were things he discounted entirely, so he could dwell on his perceived failure in movies.

The thought that he could not escape was this: Bobbie Buchanan was not a real boy. He was Pinocchio; a doll Barrow had created out of typewriter ink and paper to be his pal. Someone who would look up to him the way he wanted to look at Jim Sheldrake?

He was unsure whether he really believed it or not, but in his heightened state of mind, he was no fit judge. He could not, or would not, confide in his wife Symone.

Convinced of the truth of things, Barrow considered what to do about that. If he was to regain his mojo, to draw back the phantom limb masquerading as a Hollywood superstar, he had to act.

The sigil took him minutes to create. His desire to erase the fictional being that was Bobbie Buchanan. He felt particularly freaked out using a tantric sex session with Symone to charge the sigil, focusing on Buchanan's cherubic face as he thrust away. But needs must.

After, he slept better than he had in weeks.

Symone woke him the next morning with news fresh from the TV tickertape. Bobbie Buchanan had been found dead of a heart attack.

2018

With the advent of the internet and social media, this world grew smaller while the others grew bigger; the walls between them thinner and thinner. Control of them was democratised, no longer in the hands of the few but the many. But the few learned the art of the con. The turkey could be persuaded to vote for Christmas. Or to vote for a shady businessman who inherited his wealth, dodged the draft, and had ties to foreign powers, yet sold himself as the white knight who would champion the disenfranchised again the powers-that-be. Despite all evidence to the contrary.

The Strunk Presidency continued to practice its own brand of magic tricks. The left hand encouraged the peoples of the world to concentrate on 140-character proclamations, while the right cast doubt on every other source of information.

A lie was no longer a lie, merely an alternative fact. Experts were to be eyed with suspicion.

The White House had never looked whiter. In every sense.

Inside the Oval Office, the dragon sat on his hoard and counted his gold. Outside, hawk-headed Secret Servicemen kept watch, though whether they kept

the dragon safe from the people, or the people safe from the dragon, none knew.

The few held all the cards. They controlled the horizontal and the vertical. A dissenting voice would never be heard unless it could be mocked. A headline would never be retracted, unless it was buried at the bottom of page twelve. A vote was never allowed unless it could be rigged.

Protest was tolerated, as long as the activists bought their Question Skull Masks from Webber Brothers' stores, drank their chai lattes from a Café chain who paid no taxes and organised their demonstrations using next-gen smartphones mass produced in third world sweatshops.

And yet, as with all tyrants, eventually they exceed their grasp, and the house of cards comes tumbling down. The collective unconsciousness is a large vessel, and takes time to make a turn. But turn it does.

Strunk was armoured against the mainstream media. The people no longer trusted their 'fake news'. He remained unfazed by the outcry of scientists, politicians and Nobel Prize winners. The people were fed up with experts. His celebrity shone like chainmail.

But when it came to celebrity, he cast a very small shadow when set against a genuinely popular icon, who would not be silenced. And ML Montague had that in spades.

They duelled using the President's weapon of choice: the inter-continental ballistic tweet.

The dragon was slow-witted, his reptile brain merely dredged up whatever fleetingly crossed his mind as he channel-surfed extremist news stations and regurgitated soundbites. He had eaten his last speech writer. His opponent was a skilled wordsmith who had made a fortune from the worlds inside her head. Each barbed witticism was a rapier that slid between the dragon's scales.

The dragon did not stand a chance. He blamed the politicians, and claimed he could be trusted because he was not one of them. He spoke plainly, in the language of the ignorant, for he was fluent in it. But his gambit was flawed. Even for his fan base, things were getting worse. And Montague was quick to show them how.

Once Montague had revealed the Emperor had no clothes, skewered him so savagely that even his most ardent supporters could not look away, Strunkomania evaporated.

And they all lived. Not all of them happily, nor forever.

2019

Barrow lost himself to excess. Drink, drugs, debauchery. All the D's, and the E's.

Anything he could do to stop himself from thinking about what he believed he had done to Bobbie Buchanan. Nothing worked, so he settled for being comfortably numb.

Symone could not reach him, and eventually she left. Even the sigils had deserted him, though that was more likely to be down to his concentration.

He felt eyes upon him all the time. When he started awake from the latest bender, he swore he saw a couple watching him from his hallway. They did not seem quite real to him; two-dimensional, almost. Their clothes were solid black, silhouettes. Barrow pursued them, but by the time he had lurched into the hall, they were gone.

He saw them again, a few nights later ascending the spiral staircase to the upper storey. Even taking the stairs two at a time, he found no one, but his wardrobe stood open. Seeing the small handful of his clothes on hangers within, it just reminded him that Symone had left him to rattle about on his own.

One of the coat-hangers caught his eye. A fluorescent hazmat yellow suit cover hung from it.

'Mah fiction suit! Ah thought ah'd lost it years back.' He yanked the suit cover out of the walk-in wardrobe. It took a couple of attempts to pull it from the hanger bar, and when he did, the effort overbalanced him and he fell back, landing on his coccyx. He cried out at the stabbing pain. Another mystery ache to add to the collection.

Barrow tore into the suit cover and retrieved the garments from within. He winced to look at them. White. The sort of white it hurt to look directly at. If Barrow's voyeurs wore two-dimensional black, then the fiction suit was their opposite. He hugged the material to his chest. It felt odd, completely frictionless. Not a wrinkle on it.

He shucked off the stinking mix of clothes he had been wearing for days, discarding them in a pile on the floor, and slipped inside the suit. He went barefoot and commando. Immediately, he felt waves of zen-like calm wash over him. The aches and twinges of living in a fifty-something year-old body he had not been looking after for a while, had gone. He ran a hand over his chin, which had been covered with three weeks' growth of whiskers, but was now as smooth as a baby's. His head was equally hairless.

Admiring himself in the full-length bedroom mirror, he rummaged in one of the bedside drawers and accessorised with a pair of shades. Satisfied, Barrow decided he was ready to take one more leap of faith. He pulled out one of the volumes of *Karma Knights*, and flipped to a page containing Imperious Rex, which was not difficult. Basing the character on himself, he was arrogant enough to give himself

the lion's share of the story.

It was set in a New York alleyway. Rex was waiting for a call in a telephone kiosk.

Barrow laid the paperback on the floor at the bottom of the bed, pushing it down to make it flat enough to stay open, cracking the spine brutally. His teenage bibliophile cringed within him.

He mounted the bed, and stood with his eyes closed, focusing. He was like an Olympic swimmer pre-dive. He took a long slow breath, and he dove into the panel.

In the alley, a telephone rang. On the seventh ring, Barrow answered it.

The voice on the other end of the receiver said one word.

'Up.'

Barrow leaned out of the kiosk, and considered the sky. He felt the warmth of the sun on his skin; the purity of its solar halo beckoning to him. What better way to burn up all his guilts and shames?

He went up, and away.

Montague continued to write as Jamie Dalwhinnie, at least for a time. But she could not escape Finn Foster or her legacy. The Nameless Dread was with her constantly, wrapping her in his chill cloak, and the Negs took their toll on her.

She refused all interview requests unless they agreed not to mention Finn Foster. Any offers to licence new merchandise, authorise sequel books – even ghost-written – were rejected out of hand.

Attempts to buy back the rights to the books, in order to let them go out of print and lie fallow, failed. Rich as she was, Montague could not compete with Webber Brothers, to whom the franchise was a licence to print money. A long and protracted legal battle ensued. It ebbed and flowed in each direction. Montague's legend was fuelled by Finn Foster. As she divested herself of his influence, her powers waned, and her ability to influence went with it. She became like Samson, shorn of his magical hair. Fired up from her victory over Strunk, she wanted a new enemy to fight. The pure white fire of righteous indignation gave way to playing dirty pool. She waged war bloodily and without mercy. Publishing contracts were broken, and her longstanding agent became one of the first against the wall.

Fan fiction writers, tribute websites to her characters, even licenced tour sites; she crushed them all underfoot.

A moment of clarity saved her when she caught herself pondering the use of her autograph upon a book as an explosive device. If she could not persuade

readers to burn her books, she could detonate them remotely; get rid of them all in one fell swoop. The Nameless Dread approved, she could tell.

She retained enough of herself to be horrified.

While she was still able, she retreated into the Greatwood. She left a breadcrumb trail for the Negs to follow. And once across, when SunUp was on the cusp of becoming SunDown, Montague sealed the Ways. The sun grew black and she was in SunDown. A dangerous place, but she knew the winding paths like the lines on a writing pad.

Turning her back on the world of her birth for one Montague herself had created, she sought the magical silver river, which had been waiting, as she'd known it would.

20XX

After his miraculous liberation from Camp Gulliver, Jim Sheldrake was never quite the same. He lived now as a paper-based lifeform, albeit one virtually indistinguishable from the old flesh and blood version. Belinda had to remind him to walk from room to room, rather than discarding one body and growing a new one from the nearest source of wood-pulp, not least because he was unthinkingly destroying swathes of the priceless books that formed his library. But mostly because Belinda was creeped out by stumbling into the hollow abandoned mannequins her husband had abandoned around the place. More than once, she had found herself attempting to have a conversation with Jim, while he was obliviously feeding the birds in the back garden.

After years spent pumped full of chemical inhibitors, there was a distance that had not been there before; a gulf that he and Belinda struggled to bridge.

Was he a man who had become fiction, or merely a fiction that thought itself a man?

The phone rang. Belinda jumped up to answer it.

'Hello?' She paused, looking pensive, before turning to Sheldrake. 'Jim? It's that guy asking for Alan again.'

'Give it here,' Sheldrake stretched out for the phone. He no longer needed to get up.

'No Alan here, mate.' He replaced the receiver.

Although he remained perfectly safe in his domain, Sheldrake grew tired of the constant attacks upon the borders of Hampton by the powers-that-be. The ones who had taken him from his home before, and would never do so again. His consciousness stretched paper-thin to fortify the town limits, but his patience was

finite. The attackers may have been no more of a threat than gnats, but even a buzzing insect became annoying after a while.

They could not buy him with their money. They could not chain him with their medals. They had nothing he needed. They could not touch him, so they threatened those he cared for.

The house behind the green door could only hold so many. Sheldrake set himself the task of creating one more imaginary world.

Echoing the proclamation he had made on his fortieth birthday that he was a magician, Sheldrake made a new one. If magician had been an audacious job description, this one was a real headspinner.

Henceforth, Sheldrake said, he would be a tree; a Hamptonian Yggdrasil.

To her credit, Belinda took it in her stride, rather than citing it as grounds for divorce.

Resculpting his body from weak human dimensions into something more impressive, Sheldrake absorbed every sheaf of paper, every grimoire, every Rizla, and took root in his living room; something that Belinda had often surmised to be his final fate.

The root system dug down through carpet and floor tile; concrete and into good, honest Hampton soil. And yet further, into more abstract realms.

The foundations established, Sheldrake reached out and upward, arms became branches and punched through the ceiling, eventually bursting through the roof itself into the dawn of a new day.

Roof tiles were strewn everywhere, but even in his elevated form, Sheldrake was considerate of his neighbours. He sent out green shoots and fronds, which cradled the brickwork to each side of the terrace, shoring them up. The man behind the green door had become the green man behind the door. His mane of hair and his beard formed a leafy canopy overhead.

Date Unknown > > The Age of Steam

In the beginning, culture was solid-state; ice. With the arrival of the first story-tellers, the hunters who discovered that if they drew a successful hunt on the walls of their cave, they could impose their will upon the world, and make it do their bidding.

Over the centuries, the ice melted. Culture grew increasingly fluid as it moved faster and faster towards some sort of boiling point. Some named it the Singularity. Others, the Apocalypse, a word that literally translated as Revelation. Culture as steam.

All it needed was a nudge. And that was where the sceneshifters took the stage.

From their vantage point in the Age of Steam, they launched sorties into the past. Sceneshifters selected their players, and set the gameboard. When required, they changed the rules of the game.

In 1960, they spun the timelines forward. Their two players would not guarantee a satisfactory outcome. A third was selected.

In 1979, the sceneshifters quarrelled. Gideon Barrow's uncle should have bought him a guitar, not tarot cards, one said. It would serve the narrative better. The other disagreed. Without the cards as his lodestone, Barrow's later obsession with the esoteric may have been stillborn. Consensus was restored.

At first, their moves were naïve and heavy-handed. All that black sun imagery turning up everywhere. The Black Sun Brigade was a shade too close to the truth.

In time, they learned to leave no footprints in the sand.

Their actions attracted the attention of other powers, such as Faction Paradox. The Fathers, Cousins and Godmothers sensed potential, and made their offers. Sheldrake allied himself with them for a time, but broke away from their influence. He was never much of a joiner.

The sceneshifters cast their lines forward, and saw no harm. If anything, the Faction's machinations served the greater purpose. The players played.

A school bus delayed, to ensure a boy boarded another.

A screenplay retro-fitted and inserted into an earlier period to place Sheldrake on the witness stand.

A telephone call, where one word was spoken: 'Up.'

A nip here and a tuck there; bread and butter to a trained sceneshifter.

It began with birth. In 1953, in 1960, in 1965. It began with the Age of Steam.

In SunDown, the black sun hung balefully in the sky. During the hours of darkness, it was not safe to walk abroad. Montague told tales to calm the children she had saved so far, as they huddled in the Diamond Gondola at the edge of the shining river of Alkahest for shelter, and waited for SunUp.

Twelve hours dark and twelve hours light. That was what she wrote, but SunDown had persisted for the best part of a month.

Outside, it was raining nails again; metal clattered against the sheet-metal roof the friendly Ogre had erected over the Gondola's hull. When there was a lull in the nailstorm, the Negs rocked the bus and whispered hateful things over the gunwales.

Montague meant to reach the Greatwood, to take the children home, if that were still possible. Her efforts to declaw her creations back in the material world

had proven too successful; her armour left weak and threadbare.

As she spun new stories of Tortoise to calm the little Finns, she failed to notice one of the elders slip away to the front.

Too late, she saw him throw down the gang-plank and smile a pirate's grin. Negs swarmed onto the gleaming Gondola.

In comic-book New York, the day came when Barrow's solar hibernation would finally conclude. The Karma Knights were all there to mark the occasion, even the dead ones.

As the figure swam through the solar albumen, cracks started to spider-web across the surface, and as soon as it broke through, the sun cracked open like an egg.

Beneath, the orb was solid black, and what emerged from it was many-angled.

For a year and a day, Sheldrake the World Tree held the way open between the world of matter and that of the mind. Fellow travellers made pilgrimage to Hampton, and were allowed to make egress to the new world, freshly seeded and still growing to maturity.

In the archipelagos of IdeaSpace, Sheldrake created a utopian shadow Hampton, surrounded by all his children of flesh and print. He kept his favourites closest, but even red-headed step-children such as the *TickTockMen* and *The Secret* were welcomed back into the fold at last, all past sins washed away. Hard as it was, he resisted the urge to make the world perfect. Imperfections were what made life worth living. He allowed himself the indulgence of a few minor tweaks, however. The corner shops all stocked Coconut Crumble Creams, restored to their rightful place once more. Hampton Eternal sat at the spiritual heart of IdeaSpace just as its earthly incarnation did within Britain.

He made swings from his branches for the children, and a marital bed among his boughs. From Hampton Eternal, the vistas enfolding them was astonishing. The rise and fall of empires around them, as fads ebbed and flowed, classics were born and the familiarity of last year's fashion gave way to the shock of the new. The black sun took some getting used to.

Sheldrake saw that with Montague no longer driving the brand forward, the Fosterian Empire halted its march and began to contract. A continent became a country, and held fast at that point.

For himself, Hampton was populated by his nearest and dearest.

When the year was up, Sheldrake withdrew his tethers and Hampton stood

alone and eternal.

What Sheldrake dubbed IdeaSpace, and Montague saw as the Greatwood, Barrow knew as a multiverse of stacked realities.

To him, comic book worlds were as real as any other; their continuities built upon, knocked flat and revamped by generations of creative minds; they were living breathing entities, and he could walk between them, as long as he wore his fiction suit.

What they had in common was the knowledge that the world of flesh and the world of spirit were equally real, and the walls between them were only there if you believed in them.

Build bridges not walls, they said. But when you tore down your walls, who knew what might come trip-trapping over your bridge?

From the sceneshifters' perspective, it was something else again.

It was the answer to a question.

'Where do you get your ideas from?'

Pre-narrative Briefing R

WINNING THE LOTTERY THROUGH QUANTUM MECHANICS: A MODEST PROPOSAL

Gentlemen, at present the financial resources of the BlackSky Institute for Speculative Science are somewhat stretched. To be precise, we are broke, and it will be a matter of less than a year before this is apparent to our external creditors.

The demise of James Prufrock IV, and the passage into the hands of his executors and heirs of the Prufrock vegetable empire – dullards who lack James' long time interest in realising the dreams of Science – mean that our main source of income for bursaries, building mortgages, utility bills and alas even salaries is now considerably curtailed.

We have therefore, an urgent need to ensure fresh funds. While normal investigations into encouraging donations and fund-raising should continue (although at a pace calculated not to alarm our creditors: Professor Franklin will provide a Bayes Theorem treatment of the probabilities of success as against those of ensuring a rapid calling in of our obligations) I wish to propose a method for

combining our continued work with a direct financial gain.

You will be aware that we are gearing up to a variation on the split-screen entanglement experiment. As per the classical form of the experiment one of two separate analysis methodologies will be employed 1) a camera which will photograph the slot through which the entangled paired photons pass, and 2) a screen which will offer an impact pattern record. You will all be aware that the choice of which measuring methodology to follow has a direct effect on the states of the photon observed. When 1) is used, a single photon is perceived to pass through the slot and to function as a particle. When 2) is used a probability scatter is measured and the photon is perceived to function as a wave. It is also established that whatever measure is taken of photon A, its entangled photon B cannot appear in the opposite state even if the decision as to which recording methodology to apply is taken in respect of A only. That is, if at time t option 1) is triggered for A, and at time t + n option 2) is triggered for B the screen will not show a waveform at B) even if A and B are further apart than a light-speed signal between location q (the site of A) and location p (the site of B) could cover before the effect is evidenced. This is the problem of quantum action at a distance.

The new experiment is designed to test if quantum entanglement operates across time.

If the screen can be triggered after the passage of A through the slot, or the camera can take a photograph just after the photon has passed through, it is possible that the state of a photon B at time t-n can be determined by a decision about photon A at time t. It is also possible that by delaying the passage of photon A through the slot by a fibre-optic coil the time differential between the decision and the effect could be extended into a matter of minutes.

This gives us our opportunity. Now it has been suggested that quantum entanglement can bypass the light-speed barrier because no actual information is transmitted, that is the state of A (particle or wave) at location q or time t-n conveys nothing about location p or time t only about the Photon. However this is clearly nonsense. Imagine a bank of 38 machines all clearly numbered. Their state at location p is so set so that if a machine passes photons they are regarded as ‘positive’ and if they pass waves they are regarded as ‘negative’. This would transmit any differences we might wish to convey between the machines as a pattern from p to q faster than light, or from t to t-n back in time.

Now let the ‘positive’ state be the fact that a number has been drawn in the lottery at time t, and a ‘negative’ state be the fact that a number has not been drawn. We can therefore transmit (having made the above decisions in advance of

the construction of our machines) the lottery result from p to q faster than light or from t to t-n back in time. A computer program designed to take the lottery result as input and trigger the requisite measurement method in each machine is easy to produce.

It will be protested that a transmission length of a long lab (even if faster-than-light) or of a few minutes (even if back in time) will not enable us to move the information sufficiently far back to purchase the lottery ticket. I will address this point and the cost of the machines below.

The sale of lottery tickets cease approximately five hours before the draw. The retro-transmission potential of a single machine, five minutes, is $1/60^{th}$ of this time.

It is therefore obvious that 38 x 60 machines in an array, the output of those furthest into the future determining the measurement method of that preceding it would enable the transmission of a winning lottery number from the point of the draw to a time at which the Institute could purchase a ticket.

Now the cost of a single paired machine involving as it does moving screens, camera, paired photon emitters, and for this purpose computer control of input and the capacity to accept input from a further machine is likely to be in region of £500,000. We have therefore an apparent cost of £10.14 billion to win perhaps £10 million, which may seem wasteful – and at this point I would understand if you felt like tossing this paper aside in disgust, but consider further.

There is no reason why one machine should not be used more than once in the array.

This may sound odd: am I proposing that a machine should send a signal to itself?

Yes I am. Suppose the total time required in prepping a machine to send a signal back in time takes fifteen minutes, the signal moving back 5. Then we need only three machines to represent each number, because the first machine can take the output of the third in the fifteen minutes before its first (or if you prefer last) run, and so on. This reduces our costs to 38 x 3 or £57 million.

Still excessive? Recall we can win every lottery that takes place and uses less than 38 numbers, from the moment the array comes on line until the time when we choose either to make this methodology public or the lottery authorities get suspicious.

I ask then that you vote to acquire on credit if necessary, pending our fiscal embarrassment being discovered, the necessary parts and labour to make possible

this great and profitable scientific experiment.

Professor Gen Volst: BlackSky Institute - Pasadena

No Enemy but Despair

The last thing I truly remember is passing beyond the door behind the White Peacock, in search of the vanished man. Thereafter my memories become first a story I was telling myself, and then a faint refrain drowned by the echo of the story *they* whispered to me.

In *that* story: on the first day of the eleventh month, in the countryside of a nation famed for persimmons and spices, I came to the fortified city or castle known as Despair. It was my intension to explore its environs for the month in question and to that end I had with me a sufficiency of provisions (both solid and liquid) for the meats of Despair are proverbially bitter and its waters are those of the river Mnemon, which counteracts that of Lethe and brings remembrance in all its horror.

The City's outskirts are possessed of an austere and delineated elegance, which falls short of beauty in one respect: everything is grey. The outhouses and grain stores are the colour of a moody autumnal sky before a thunderstorm that never breaks, but squats as oppressive as a thick industrial cloud. The road is the grey of old, brittle skin, and of certain forms of mould that lack medicinal properties. Both colours have no trace of the vital hard greyness of battleship functionality though this can be seen in the peaks and sheer ramparts of the Walls themselves.

I had with me the manuscript known as ‘The Mourner’s Tale’ which anonymous piece of mock-Chaucerian 16th Century morbidity in poetry had first written of the city, as well as – no longer carried save in my memory – the text of Thomson’s ‘The City Of Dreadful Night’. These had been my constant reading during the exercises, both of the will and of the body – if I neglect the soul, I must I fear do so – which had enabled me to perceive, and to approach the fortress itself.

By this time I had lost contact with the team of fellow explorers who had embarked with me a year before from Plymouth. Most had elected to stay in Contentment, that winsome habitation whose rosy vineyards, sweet-nut trees, and compliant and energetic locals of all sexes and all amatory persuasions had proved irresistible to a certain kind of irresolution. I had left there with only two

remaining companions: Professor Gen Volst, late of the Pasadena Institute of BlackSky research, his name irretrievably ruined by his association in that Institutes ill-fated attempt to apply quantum mechanical principles to the winning of State Lotteries, and the solemn, and sanguine, Colonel Malachi Yarrow – who had never been known to smile during the duration of our sea-voyage and trek over land, except on his successfully identifying an unusual variety of insect. The former had vowed never to stop until his discovered a place where the crimes of his associates were not a hissing and a byword, and the latter had vowed to leave any place where he found more than twenty recognisable insects. Their goals then were hardly such as to be accomplished in Contentment where Gen's embarrassment was a known cause of backslapping and would-be encouragement (a thing his proud Bostonian spirit took more to heart than cat-calls or ignominy) and where the only apparent insects were pleasantly mumbling honey-bees and the occasional **[terminology deleted by war-filter during OMEGA therapy]**. Fredrick had remarked of them that the latter were not insects and as such not strictly within his purview, but that 'they were in any event – extremely – common.' Privately I believed he was for some reason afraid of them.

I came to the City gate called Automortis, that is to say the gate of Suicides. It was a pity Gen had been unable to wait, but I had high – I was about to say hopes, but these by long tradition had been left at the very outermost dwellings that surround the City – expectations, that he could in any event provide me an entrance. It was with as great a flourish as the greyness of the scene supported, that I drew his severed head from the bag I had carried for the past week.

I pressed it against the gun-metal plates of the great riveted door, and observed with interest that his nose, pressed firmly against the pitted surface, seemed to depress some switch or mechanism, so that with no sign of a human hand at the controls, the great and heavy portcullis rose upwards towards a sky of its own colour, leaving open a portal darker in shades of night.

I feel I should break off my main account to explain more of Volst's fate – in particular how he bribed one of the itinerants of the township of Kasting, an elderly man with a beard, and hourglass and a scythe, unemployable in the long desert summer, to provide him with a blade.

The mechanism he thereafter designed to lop his head from his shoulders: a combination vertical guillotine and slingslot (intended in part to give the suicide the sensation of rising rapidly into the air towards a non-existent heaven) was part and parcel of his genius for tinkering.

I had always felt he was too hard on himself and I trust that his severed head had fully lost consciousness before landing in the patch of sage-brush, prickly

pear, and giant desert nettles, where I eventually found it, visible only by the bright yellow neckachief still attached to the ragged neck. It was hardly his fault that his scheme to win the lottery by Quantum Mechanics resulted in roughly twenty five million winning tickets and a return on each of less than the value of the ticket, and in particular on his own Institutes investment of minus thirty five million dollars on the first attempt.

Some people had found it amusing, and no one (even the workers at the Institute, given that it had faced bankruptcy anyway) had been really hurt, but Gen had taken the whole disaster very much as a betrayal on his part of the essential seriousness of science. He had come to believe that he had failed simply because he had attempted to transmit data through time for gain, and that his 'failure' to win, would forever obscure the fact that with one hundred and fourteen linked 'quantum slit experiment' machines he had transmitted a six figure number one day back in time. The action of the office boy who had posted the 'guaranteed winning number' on his website with four hours' worth of ticket buying time left to run, was not to my mind some supernatural scientific vengeance levied for the breaking of Hawking's 'Causality Protection Conjecture' but merely a failure (all too understandable in one so naïve in worldly matters as Gen) to reason that a human weakness could put at risk even the grandest possible victory. Now, of course, Lotteries are drawn two full days after the closure of ticket sales, and the cost of a linked Volst Array needed to send data back that far is considerably greater than the benefit from any hundred lottery wins.

Additionally of course the sale of Volst Array parts and details of their construction have become a military secret intended to provide alerts of future terrorist attack. That was, I think the final straw for the Professor. He tore his hair, he pulled at his moustache, he kicked the dusty rocks along the dusty trail and muttered. I am not a physicist, nor a theologian, but I recall at least a little of his muttering and transcribe it here from memory (a memory already painfully enhanced by the fumes of the glassy waters of the river Mnemon).

'Can they not see that they are pulling the future down upon their own heads? Somewhere in the oversum of possible futures there lurks like a bandito in ambush, a terrorist affront of supreme audacity and horror. To this, in the hope of averting the same, they have afforded a code such as my array can transmit: as it might be 'wave/particle/particle/particle…' across the totality of the machine array but the consequences of an attack of supreme-horror, are a counter attack of abysmal awfulness, and that counter will come first by virtue of my work. So it will be 'unprovoked' by any act in pre-causal time, and hence the sin will be on

our heads. We will have burned, or shot down, or invaded, or destroyed people, planes, and countries whose evils have been written nowhere save in the pattern of probability being pushed back through my evil machines. Poor Oppenheimer, he wrote that he felt he had become Shiva, destroyer of worlds, for the mere development of nuclear weaponry, but I have taken the power of choice from man and slaved it to the output of a quantum mechanical process. I have committed the one crime even the jealous God of the Old Testament would not stoop to the crime of removing from man his free will.'

And so on. Shortly before severing his own head and whooshing it slap bang into a briar-patch.

Which brings me back to Despair. I had hoped to have a party of fellow investigators with me, so that my own subjective assessments of this fabled domain might be checked and cross examined by others, but the departure of Albrecht, Edwin, O'Brien and Crankschwaft in Contentment, Gen's suicide, and the unfortunate events surrounding the Colonel's last entomological discovery left me alone. Let me then set down how it felt to enter the Citadel proper. It was hard, the air within its walls seemed to have thickened into something akin to breathable amber, dense and distorting to the vision, imparting a sickly and miasmic glow to each sight, pushing against me. I felt like a man who believes that he is striving forward in a race, while all around him runners pass by on every side until with horror he realised that in front of him is a solid and unyielding barrier of invisible rejection that without force holds all his efforts at one single point permitting neither forward movement nor any disengagement from the attempt, for in that imaginary position it seemed to me that to cease to press against that repulsion would be to leave embedded in it, my face, my eyes, and the skin of my hands – all torn away like the outermost skin of an onion, leaving a bloody shambling mass.

Unlike Gen I could never commit suicide – at least not in any overt, obvious, or ordinary way, although I suppose it could be argued that journeying to Despair was in itself a form of ritual suicide, as I expected to exit the city only if substantially transformed by it, and if my sources were correct I would, having entered it, neither exit nor remain within – but of this in its proper season.

Consequently I had intended to enter Despair through one of its other five gates. The next largest to the gate called Suicide is according to 'The Mourner's Tale' that of Pain – according to Boromino's commentaries, this gate is sacred to one of De Quincy's Lady psychopomps (I had intended to avoid that one also if possible both because of the physical inconvenience of maiming myself at the start of an important psycho-exploratory sojourn, but also because De Quincy was

quite simply one of the most over-rated writers I had ever been required to wade through, and Boromino was as great an ass as a Doctorate from Cambridge would permit. Those of 'Flatness' and 'Void' were likewise impossible, without attaining the stature of one of Abbott's Flatlandians, or the egoless disinterest of a Lama, but I had expected to have every chance of entering by the Gate called Meaninglessness. Now of course I did not need to make the attempt. The leaflet I had acquired from the Enemy would be unnecessary. Professor Volst's head sufficed me an entry.

Inside Despair, light from outside red-shifted as burnt-umber filled with motes of burning blackened paper not from any fire I had lit, but carrying the whiff of great works singed beyond recognition, as it might be the missing pages of C S Lewis's The Dark Tower, on which if legend had it Despair was mentioned, and which having reclaimed them once from the bonfire, his literary executor had hastily destroyed, excising them from that portion published after his death.

You will find Despair in many fictions. Bunyan of course made him the Giant of Doubting Castle, inverting the relationship – for it is in Despair, that the Giant Doubt resides. Elsewhere Thomas Love Peacock wrote of the blue devils of atrabilious despair that battered on the hero of *Nightmare Abbey*, and of course and always the Goddess Melancholia observes her mistressry across the whole benighted Tor and outcropping on which the citadel stands.

Inward then, into that darkness in which all faked and partial erudition falls away, and the incantations of beloved writers bear no more weight than the scrawl of a drooling imbecile penned briefly on the ruined wall of a mire-splattered outhouse. Into Despair where the hand at one's throat is no less unknown because it is one's own.

The Colonel's last words to me, his last audible words at any rate – very well, his last words before his final curious discovery – had been to be sure to search the castle well for the object of his quest. He had believed on the basis of no less an authority than an obscure recession of 'The Romance Of The Rose' that within Despair could be found the Moth Of The Shroud, that insect from whose supernaturally fine silk the Shroud of The Christ was woven and which for its implicit part in the death of God was in the world at large marked henceforth with the sign of the skull, as the Death's Head – but which here within the aching, cocooning, cocoon surrounding surroundings of the Citadel of Gigantic Doubt, a small colony of aboriginal uncursed moths remained. What nonsense we expend our lives pursuing. I had remonstrated with him, I had pointed out that my sources – 'The Mourner's Tale' being the very least – spoke of no such Moth but only of the Other Grail, that Vessel that catching the seed and blood spilt by the

hanging Judas, brought the negative immortality: the ultimate negation: the draft of which would give the Suicide not of Death but of Unmaking and Turning Back Upon Itself The Lifeforce Entire until drinking from it a man might be no more, and never once have been. Thus it is also known as The Cup Untasted, and it was my sole remaining desire.

'What an interesting stick insect,' are not perhaps the most inspired last words, but they are, I suppose, better than 'aaaaaarghhhhh', and the discovery of the Electric Stick Insect, if not the quasi-pre-lapsarian form of the Death's Head Moth, was at least some form of final valediction for the Colonel, who would never have discovered it if he had remained in Contentment with Arvus, Britney and Alonzo the Carthorse (a nickname; he wasn't actually a carthorse) any more than I would have made my discovery as to the contents of the Red Cupboard in the guardroom of the entrance tower of the Gate of Suicides of the City called Despair.

To reach it, among the buildings and all the rooms of Despair that are built like Nautilus shells forcing the explorer to compress and narrow themselves as they progress I wormed my way forward. Until I realized that my progress was impeded by the head of Professor Gen Volst. I set it down on a small jade table and with the absolute inevitability of a dream it began to speak:

Listen. *This is the point where we make our pitch. However tiny our chance we have to try.* ***The Enemy speaks.*** *They try to make us sound worse than them. But be honest, finally be honest. How could we* ***be****? All that is, is, because the Great Houses made certain choices. We are not the same. ALL OR NONE. We do not choose. We enable all pathways, we permit all histories. Open all the doors. We are not the tyrants that set the worlds in motion. Open your hearts. Embrace the ONE.* ***In unity strength. In eightfold symmetry peace. Make the Last Choice and Become All.*** *Remember.*

I awoke before the open mouth of the Scarlet closet. In that cupboard of heavy scented redwood hewn from a single tree are the afterbirths of angels sealed in jars which might elsewhere have once held cherry preserves or blackcurrant jam. Impossible outcast worm-casts, shed skins and detritus, bound in the translucent formaldehyde and bitter almond scented preservatives of the heavenly sluice rooms. The aborted archangels, float in their crystal catafalques. To see them is to understand the hidden second birth, which is the birth into the mysteries of Despair.

We are born as angels in the widest outermost room of the Citadel called Despair, everything else of the world outside is a false memory implanted in that birth trauma. The names of companions – impossible and changing names in themselves – lost in a place with an impossible name, the names of others dead or sacrificed outside the walls. These are the designations of the parts of ourselves

that are never born, the womb-strangled, the birth-devoured, the sperms and eggs that never grew, or embedded, or met. The weave that the looms make not. We are the absolutely unlikely, the life clinging to a narrow rock, within a brief space of light and heat, in a cosmos mostly composed of empty space or energies and types of matter so unknown they have no place in our widest bestiaries: and of that narrow life we are the tiny fraction that survives the red maw of birth, that chews up all but the tiniest fraction of the set of possibilities. We are the unlucky. Not for us the endless oblivion of non-being, peaceful, dreamless, outside of time. For us pain and the possibility of pain and the horrors of being and the long, long grind back to the tomb. Each second that passes is a second of the sentence of existence.

And yet this is nonsense. Despair cannot be romanticised. There is no balm in non-existence. I do not stand in a wide room with walls the colour of ivory with only a scarlet wood cabinet for company. I have not travelled. I stand behind the white statue of a peacock in a garden, crying. I have awoken from my coma, and my husband is still dead. The House is empty and its new owner is missing. A kind man takes my hand and says he will discover the truth. He goes into the Peacock House – into its terrible white light. I am her and I am he.

The Citadel called Despair stands at every door. The coin of entry is intelligence. That is what damns us. The beasts live their lives, so far as we call tell without despair, except for those sufficiently close to us to feel the passing of their own kind or their own identity. Elephants shown themselves in a full length mirror will recognise and reach for distinguishing marks on their own bodies, dogs will go a-snarl for the rival dog behind the mirror. Elephants, apes, whales, and humanity, mourn.

If there were no god the world would be a charnel house: and so it is. Even now in this early 21st century of human over-population, the dead outnumber the living, and always will do so – now that we have thrown away the brief window in which we might have taken our species to the stars – that period in which fossil fuels could support us long enough to learn how to do without them, which we squandered on war and religion and better and bigger flint-axes.

We live on, awaiting which of the Enemies will engulf us. We make them fictional to learn to fight them, but they learned in the end how to make themselves more than real.

The myth of God enables us to export our doubts and fears to something other. If He is with us, what can be against us. Nothing, save those bolstered by other myths.

This is not a narrative, alas. Despair eats coherent fictional narrative. Fiction, as

Tolkien wrote, is a form of ‘sub-creation’ and without faith in even ‘creation’ where can it arise? Fiction of the mythic kind demands a hero encounters a problem and transcends it, and fiction of the literary kind demands that an aspect of human life be depicted and illuminated, but these collapsing fictions can neither transcend nor illuminate, only endarken.

There can be no triumph in the face of meaninglessness. The Gods may go down before the Ice Giants in Ragnarok and still extol the heroic virtues, but even there the humans who seed the next cycle are supposed to continue huddled in the roots of the world-Ash. When nothing survives: when no legacy exists, when in the end the universe thins out to chunks of cold iron cooling in the infra-red, or superheats into a dense informationless burning ylem, what point remains? Long before then, my wit or piety, cheer, or despair will matter as much to my successors as the impacted wisdom tooth of an Egyptian slave dead three thousand years before your birth matters to you: and yet, how horrible it is to think of that pain persisting, to imagine that in some facet of ever fixed space-time from the aspect of eternity every child that ever suffered an intolerable tooth ache suffers it forever, unchangeably.

Oh rather let the time machines be risked and all history tarmacked over with the present. But time travellers, like aliens or God, are absent even though they have every other time or world or plenum to come to being in. Nowhere is the one world or time or universe in the oversum of histories, or the whelter of parallels, or the tortured in and out iron-lung wheezing forty five billion-year breaths of the osscillating cosmos, that has birthed someone able to do us good.

We are alone.

We die alone. We have no descendants who will redeem the past: no valkyries that will swoop down on every battlefield as history is unpicked by the paramedics of a future utopia. There were no Angels at Mons. We fill the world with scribbled myth to make it tolerable and then kill ourselves over the colours of our crayoning.

Red Angels versus Blue Angels doodled in the spiral-bound books of heaven. Red Ants versus Black.

That is all.

Pre-narrative Briefing S

As a young man I was assigned to a posting in 1880s Germany[9]. I remember I

heard a children's story, there. Nothing I have heard since is clearer than *that*, to me, for it was not long after that *they* came for me in the night, and my mind became their game-board, and my fears their pieces.

The Enemy's representative at my interrogation was a Mister Gout: I remember that much, although I remember so little. A fat little man in rich silks, who jested that he *had 'swapped places with his masters to the unspeakable advantages of them both'*. I felt that this was an unfair reference to a briefing I'd never had – an in-joke between monsters.

I know Regen-Inf got me out of there.

TIMESHIP DOWN. Fire falling in the slow rain. My body in crisis from toxins and torture. The Enemy's own chambers were as dusty and empty as an isolated promontory – all empty. Mister Gout splashed red with blood as his back was darkened. Shadow limbs about his throat.

Intra-Recovery Testimony Agent X-12

The Map and The Spiders

(Or how the Kingdom changed hands) c1888[10]

There was once a King who demanded that a map be made of his kingdom, one so accurate that no-one would ever be lost again in the woods or the moors, for they could find the very pattern of the rocks and the bones of the earth laid out as roads to walk on. Furthermore, demanded this intemperate and ambitious King, the map should hold the motions of the stars so that by night it would show the way by the smallest candle-flame. (And the King told himself he did this so that all things would be well for his subjects, but in fact he called for such a thing to show his own greatness for he said to himself in his heart, either my subjects can make such a Map or they cannot. If they can, then I have called forth their greatness and thus am Greater still, and if not, yet still the greatness is mine who can conceive in my imagination what cannot be done by science nor by art magical.)

Such a map was beyond the making of his wise men and his cunning women be they learned from the long strife of life or from the great university the King's father had endowed, and for many years the simple and the learned alike (although the latter perhaps from wise policy) praised the King for having conceived that which no-one could assay.

But there was a certain child, in the Kingdom, who said: the King must seek

advice from the humblest things and from the greatest weavers, for the spiders know all the ways of the Kingdom, and of all things they are the most marvellous in artifice, for are they not the descendants of Arachne who out-wove even the Goddess Athena[11] in the old times when the pagan Gods were still spoken of with awe and not as demons.

But it is dangerous to make mythic suggestions to humourless Kings, and the Child received a box-upon-the-ears, and was shut up in a dungeon for their trouble, among the spiders. 'Study them well,' the King said, laughing, 'and when you have learned their language and are become my ambassador to their Court, you may promise them any boon within my power an' they spin for me the map which will be as the world really is.'

And for many years the King forgot his desire for the Great Map, and sought other amusements such as war, and the sporting with maidens, and the raising of taxes, and the fretting over having a male heir, and the cutting off of the heads of wives, and the suppression of other people's religions and all such matters as divert the thoughts of Kings.

Then one day the King awoke in his bed-chamber and found something amiss, although he could not decide what it was. The bed was as covered with fur and fabric as was his wish, and through the great stone edged windows – fitted with narrow panes of new and expensive glass, in frames of rare woods – the light came in as it ever had, to shine upon his gold and tapestries. And yet something was different.

He stretched, and yawned, and though he was older now he was still a big man and proud of the outstretched reach of his arms, but never before had he brushed the ceiling with his fingers in reaching out to greet the day, for the ceiling was higher than a man's reach.

And the ceiling was sculptured plasterwork in gilt and bright paint: bearing the shields and emblems of the Great Houses of the Kingdom. The ceiling was a hard, real factual thing.

But it gave under his fingers, and it was too close.

And the web spun by the spiders who were the friends of the Child the King had sacrificed for the giving of good advice – the web which looked more like the world than the world did, and yet was softer and nearer than the world's hard edges – fell softly down onto the King's broad face, and into his open mouth the little spiders swarmed.

And for the map they had made, they took from him that which was in his power to give: for it belonged only to him. Inside the King, they spun a web that ran from his toes to his head, and pulling on those threads they made the King

bow and dance, and act as they wished. The King ordered the Child released from the dungeon, and the child was now a child no longer but in their youthful years.

And the child whispered something in the King's ear which no man understood, not even the shaking ghost that still lived in the silent screaming halls within the skull of the King, for it was in the language of spiders. But that thing was 'thank you'.

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1 Aaron Burr was technically President for five months in the latter half of 1803, during the period when Thomas Jefferson, was indisposed due to functional possession by the Loa of the Nine Angles: Mr. Burr resumed the post of Vice President when the Loa was driven out by the sacrifice of Agent J. The Second term neo-presently attributed to Martin Van Buren was held during a weak diversification event by Jebadiah Whipple MD.

2 For obvious reasons. Entarodora Oh see, the biographies of the briefing producers if you must.

3 The garrulous Scot described the signature, as 'crazy maths symbols' – but a hand-written copy of the letter, still in his father's possession, later came to light, and has been transcribed here.

4 The facial scaring, resembling the result of an acid attack, eventually succumbed to plastic surgery but his loss of self-confidence did not recover and by the time the surgery was completed he had already settled into working as a producer on *Brookhaven's New Celebrity Theatre*.

5 The suggestion that the drawings were prepared in advance underneath the wallpaper which was then rendered in some way transparent chemically has never been verified, and is counter-indicated by the footage showing Gee wiping at the drawing of the blind man and the wolf, in which charcoal can be seen transferring from the wall to her hand.

6 *The Seventy Six Wolves of Julian Maufrere – the Dadaist of the Isle of Jersey*.

7 The name of the artist was neither Julian, nor Maufrere, nor was the title of the book exactly as given here.

8 Though sketched in 1963-64, these resemble nothing so much as 'pop-figures' or 'bobble-heads'.

9 1888-89 is a crucial war nexus, look for frequency of the word 'spider' in text form over time using one of your search engines, such as Ngram. Odd, isn't it?

10 Attributed to Wilhelm Liebknecht. The text has been retranslated, and modernised for spelling.

11 This is not the most common form of the story: in Ovid the affronted Goddess is Minerva, nor is it certain Arachne prevailed, rather than being o'erawed.

However in the story as told by Liebknecht, the adversary of the Mother of Spiders is the Greek Goddess of Wisdom, rather than the Roman.

AWAKE – FINAL BRIEFING

[POST NARRATIVE]

Subjective Injection Omega

I am awake. I who was Agent A, who was Avus, who was Cousin Mace, and Sergeant Littlejohn's listeners. I who was Gideon and Jezebella. I who was and am a creature of Patchwork. I who am become Fay, and a buyer up of time in a cocktail dress. I who walked into the House of the Cult of the White Peacock. I who read leaflets pushed under doors. I who spied. I who was X-12. I who was a psychiatrist.

The screens are all dark. From the other wards I can hear a sound I will not describe. Am I ready? They were merely real once, I know that. When did they become fear itself? The Enemy, I know now, is an infection of the imagination – perhaps the imagination itself. We laid our rules and iron lines across reality, like grids upon a map, and we said – where we have not yet looked – there is the same as here: forever.

But the spaces between our gaze were squeezed and distorted by the iron-lines of our manufactured perceptions and those distortions breed terrible things. Or we imagined they did – for we could make no myths and have no dreams about the cold iron-worlds. And myth and dreams will out, my masters. There will be dragons on the maps they make.

The narratives tried to prepare me but I could not face my memories. Perhaps it will go better for you for whom my fears have been distilled as wine.

Inject the drug of me into your cortexes. Drink of my memories, be inoculated against THEM.

I hear their many touches on the door. They will be on my back, soon enough, or in my mouth, and then my limbs will be their puppetries. They are already in my head.

Awake

AWAKE

AWAKE

They are present. Prepare to fight or flee or join usssssssssssssss.

Biographies of Authors

Editor/Contributor

Simon Bucher-Jones edited these briefings in response to an increasingly vivid voice in his head. He hopes you can see between the lines. He wrote *The Death of Art*, and *Ghost Devices* on his own, and the much improved *The Taking of Planet 5* and *Grimm Reality* with brilliant co-writers. He's responsible for everything in *The Book of the Enemy* not written by the marvellous and entirely real writers below. As, always, working in this mythology he's indebted to the Giants who evilly and retroactively inserted themselves into space-time before him. If he had not been able to stand on their shoulders, he wouldn't have been so afraid of heights, slopes, and ultimate nihility.

Contributors

Helen Angove began her working life as an electrical engineer on the south coast of England, and then worked briefly as a pricing analyst for an electricity supply company, which was as much fun as it sounds. After this she trained to be a priest in the Church of England and spent seven years in full time ministry before deciding that she had to leave before she tore out all her hair. These days she is living with her husband and two children in Southern California, and, against all the dictates of common sense, pursuing a career in writing. Helen's previous writing includes several short stories, including one previous Faction Paradox and several *City of the Saved* stories, and the historical murder mystery novella *A Cut May Heal* published by Blind Eye Books in the anthology *Blades of Justice*.

Jacob Black has been writing since he could hold a pencil, spending any free time and any scrap of paper crafting stories and building narratives. Finally, he actually became good at it. Practice makes perfect. Jacob tirelessly defends and discusses the *Doctor Who* novels of the 'Wilderness Years' and firmly considers the BBC Books Eighth Doctor Adventures his corner of *Who* (though, the shadowed embrace of the Faction continues to become more and more inviting). Jacob is currently working as an assistant editor on **Nate Bumber's** charity anthology, is piecing together and plotting a fanzine depicting the definitive Eighth Doctor Chronology (for him anyway), and occasionally adds a word or two to the original novel series festering in his hard drive.

Nate Bumber is almost certainly the pseudonym of a Faction Paradox fanatic who currently lives under a mountain of unread books and emails. He spends a

significant part of his time editing an upcoming *Doctor Who* Unbound charity anthology to benefit the Against Malaria Foundation, moderating Reddit's two largest *Doctor Who* communities, and inventing overambitious plans for future writing projects. One day, he will write a book, run for President of the United States, and set foot on the moon (not necessarily in that order).

Lawrence Burton was born in the same town as Aleister Crowley in the liver of Shakespeare country on the day before episode three of *Galaxy Four*. He was at art college with Traci Emin and Charlie Adlard, has been thrashed at chess by Billy Childish, and was in all sorts of supposedly seminal industrial weirdy bands back in the eighties and nineties. More recently he wrote a novel called *Against Nature* and is the author of numerous self-published efforts. Lawrence Burton is still in existence today, very happily married and living in San Antonio, Texas. His favourite television show is *Wheel of Fortune*. He paints book covers too. He painted this one.

Alain Chartier (1385-1430) was the author of the original poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci,* whose title was later shameless stolen by John Keats. Rumours that, following the intervention of a time active power, he was made Arch Deacon of Paris, and survived to die in Avignon in 1449, solely in return for writing the counterblast to Keats reproduced here, which formed part of some obscure artistic or aesthetic temporal gambit, must be regarded as unlikely. The 1820's poem is far more likely to have been merely attributed to him, by some contemporary writer annoyed with Keats, possibly *The Indicator's* editor Leigh Hunt. However it is worth noting that Guilliame Bouchet's *Annals of Aquitaine* (1524) implies that Chartier survived until at least 1436, in order to receive the scandalous kiss offered him by Margaret of Scotland upon his 'witty mouth' as she did not travel to France until that year.

My name is **Lesley Drakken**. In my life and in my writing I often find myself caught between a search for peace and balance and my own wild energies. My writing often combines both the beautiful and the savage of nature. I've dabbled in writing in many genres, and I've found this duality of the natural world a reoccurring truth across all my genres. What matters to me the most in my writing is giving my readers a full experience of the worlds I describe.

Jay Ealeswas born between episodes 3 and 4 of *The Enemy of the World*, appropriately enough. Some might say suspiciously so. He edited*Faction Paradox: Burning with Optimism's Flames* for Obverse Books and has contributed stories to their *Iris Wildthyme*, *City of the Saved* and *Faction Paradox* ranges. You see that Obverse Books logo on the spine of this very book? He did that. He also shares the

love with other publishers when they let him. He writes, edits, designs, letters, publishes and teaches comics and has the long-arm stapler scars to prove it. He was News Features Editor for the award-winning *Borderline* magazine. A British Fantasy Award runner-up two years running, he lives with a double Eisner nominated writer. He's had tea and chocolates at Alan Moore's house and likes XTC more than most. Stalk him at *www.factorfictionpress.co.uk*

Irma Ebbinghaus, daughter of Herman Ebbinghaus (1850-1909), Born 9th November 1885, inducted into Strategist Guild of House Lineacrux after the death of her brother Julius in 1898. The first of a number of successful 'child-inductees' she was given house status and the 'life for a life' restoration of her brother to the basal timeline in return for her acceptance of the annulment of her personal history. She has proved remarkably successful in the investigation of war-trauma, both in terms of its alleviation and its retro-weaponisation.

Entarodora: the pre-eminent war-strategist of the first 40 or so years of the War, she nevertheless managed to piss away her authority in a scheme that may or may not have succeeded in a way that is still not entirely understood. Successful or not, the so-called *Brakespeare Voyage* left her disavowed by haughty Lineacrux. While still invited to contribute to briefing cycles by other Great Houses, in her new capacity as a festering embarrassment to her former sponsors, her comments are regarded as speculative at best, and spurious if not treasonous at worst. Recently she has kept her spirits up by wearing dresses from Thierry Mugler's *La Chimere Couture Collection (1997-98)*, and by taking a large number of paramours and abandoning them in different aeons.

Lisa Sarah Good is a published illustrator, the producer and editor of a charity video in (extremely limited) international distribution and occasionally writes stuff. She worked for many years in a photo lab, but things didn't develop correctly. After deciding that Hollywood was not quite her 'thing' she decided to hang her handicapped parking placard in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Her four favorite people are her kids and her cats.

Andrew Hickey is a writer of both fiction and non-fiction. His previous work in the Faction Paradox universe includes a novel, *Head of State*, and the short story 'The Adventure of the Piltdown Prelate' in *Tales of the Great Detectives*. He has also written *The Mind Robber*, in Obverse Books' Black Archive series, and many books on TV, comics, and music. His third novel, *The Basilisk Murders*, will be released in November 2017.

Wilhelm Martin Philipp Christian Ludwig Liebknecht (1826-1900) was a German radical who set out to emigrate to the US, only to be caught up in the

Swiss revolution of 1847. Exhilarated by this, he hurried to Paris on hearing of the 1848 uprising, only to mistime his arrival, and on a return to a volatile Germany he was immediately imprisoned for treason. Freed by the short-lived (German) revolution he was briefly feted before having to flee back to Switzerland. Banished from there, he lived in London, and became friends with Karl Marx. Returning to Germany after an amnesty, he became an important politician in the various Socialist Parties and was imprisoned for opposing the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. On release he was re-elected to the Reichstag only for his party to be outlawed until 1890. During this period - when he was in office, but the Social Democratic Party was not yet legal - he wrote a number of socialist parables including *The Map and the Spiders,* and, *The Spider and The Fly*.

Marko Marz: is/will be a noted Plutocrat (before the uprising) and a barefaced swindler (before and after) hailing from an openly mercantile post-human period. He is one of few known transhumans of the ‘coteries to have publicised his interest in acquiring time technology, a science generally regarded by his contemporaries as either impossible or taboo depending upon how their language(s) are translated. His book on retroeconomics was published earlier than his own time, in an example of the medium melding with the message.

Philip Purser-Hallardis an author, editor and civil servant based in Bristol, and absolutely not a ravening prehistoric scorpion-god. His fiction includestheurban fantasy trilogy consisting of *The Pendragon Protocol, The Locksley Exploit* and *Trojans*, as well as the Faction Paradox novel *Of the City of the Saved*, and various short stories and novellas. He edits the Black Archive series of monographs on *Doctor Who* stories for Obverse Books, and has also edited six volumes of fiction. His hobbies include good food, board games and consecrating the faithful with the sacrament of his holy venom. He is married and has a son with a perfectly normal number of limbs.

Christian Read is a writer based in Australia. He's worked on computer games like *Secret World* and *Warhammer 40 000: Eternal War* and *Hand of Fate*. ‘The Lark Case Files' novels and *Nil-Pray*: a weird fantasy, as well as graphic novels such as *The Eldritch Kid*, *Karnak* and *Unmasked*. His hobbies include staying inside.

Captain Robert Scarratt is now definitely dead. His contributions to this book must therefore logically have been provided by a neutral-net emulation, or possibly a ghost-writer. There is absolutely no connection between his corpse, definitely and definitively located in 27th century Vienna, but linearly *now* and the appearance of Little Brother Ratas de la Cicatriz among the ranks of Faction Paradox.

Five years ago, a student by the name of **Michael Simpson** got lost in the library of Manchester Metropolitan University. The entity that later emerged from the library still called itself **Michael Simpson** (though whether you should believe it is up for debate) and declared itself a War historian and potential author to any sapient creature that would listen (which certainly brings the entity's honesty into question). Described by one eyewitness as 'a grey blur that smelled faintly of paper', the entity has also written 'The Tin Woman and The Fairy Queen' for the forthcoming *Doctor Who* Unbound charity anthology and currently divides its time between its work as a clerk and its interest in writing the strange biography of the spirit of the wind and the bizarre history of the Imperial cults of the British Isles.

From a very early age **Grant Springford** was raised on a staple diet of all things *Star Wars*, *Doctor Who* and Marvel Comics.As a result he has spent pretty much his entire life creating characters and stories. Grant created, illustrated and wrote the self-published comics *Pest Control* and *The Abnormals*. He's currently working on a sci-fi novel for young adults and developing a new comic (courtesy of characters and ideas he dreamed up many years ago that have point blank refused to go away). 'Lifecycle' is his first published prose.

William Shakespeare was already 178 years dead when trophy hunters took his skull from its tomb in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford in 1794, and time-scans have verified that for those 178 years the skull in question did indeed rest in peace. This is far too longer a period for any conventional cellular reconstruction methodology to spin information off bone, and even psychometry which has produced evidence above the level of gossipy wishful thinking in at least 5% of trials, is far from reliable in evoking anything in the way of a substantially continuous persona. It is therefore unclear as to whether or not Mirraflexes *Oracle of Shakespeare* is much more than a standard briefing trawl-psychengine with an 'insert Shakepearean quote' routine appendixed to its formatting. It has however achieved un-nerving success in the Lesser Batavian Campaign - where its decision to invade Bohemia by sea has been described as *brilliantly unorthodox* - and written three plays during routine downtime.

Professor Gen Volst vanished after the Pasadena Blacksky Institute's attempt to win the lottery by quantum mechanics ended in infamy. It has been suggested by some that his name may always have been a pseudonym.

Nick Wallace's debut novel *Fear Itself* was published in 2005. The 12 years since have led more astute followers of his career to know him simply as The Last Inaction Hero.

Xenaria Who Survived is the honorary title presently held by the War Hero Xenaria. It is feared however than her psyche has not yet been successfully re-integrated, after the failure of the *Fifth Planet Gambit.*

Colonel Malachi Yarrow worked for military intelligence under the codename Y, he headed the section of the British Secret Service dealing with the Mal'akh until his retirement at 54, when he moved to the Island of Jersey. In his letters he describes the island initially as, *a splendidly peaceful dead-end* (2011) and only later as *the inviolable citadel of forces more evil than any I have hitherto encountered* (2017). His book on the hauntings of the island, represents a midway point between the retirement and what may have been Alzheimer's. Colonel Y, disappeared from his home in 2017. A white peacock statue, stands outside it. Despite the incoherent ravings of the MI5 agent sent to investigate, he never, so far as is known, collected insects.